The modern news media is a different phenomenon from the Victorian media. Technological advance means that newspapers are no longer the main source of immediate news. Instead, they are for most people, the means which amplify and fix information already in the public domain. Victorian newspapers also looked rather different. Few, apart from the *Illustrated Police News*, used banner headlines in the ways which are familiar to consumers of modern newsprint. They did, increasingly, make use of headlines (banner and cross-headlines), often marked out not by differences in font size, but by use of capitals. Developments from the 1880s saw the cheaper papers in particular, such as *Lloyds News*, become more eye-catching in their layout—a development associated with the so-called New Journalism.

But there was less need for such devices, because Victorian newspapers were much more clearly demarcated in terms of where they located their news content within their pages. Readers of *The Times*, for example, who wanted to read law and crime reports would turn to the pages after the leading articles, usually around page ten or eleven. In the *Daily Telegraph*, pages four and/or five were so occupied. News of breaking crime might indeed appear earlier in the papers, when such news was defined by headlines to alert the reader, but that was relatively unusual. Today, crime news is scattered throughout the papers, and headlines are useful as identifying the nature of the report as well as catching the eye and appealing to the reader. But despite these differences, there remain powerful echoes between the criminal conversations which interested the Victorians, and those which resonate today. This volume has concentrated on issues given prominence by public debate, conducted through the media but invoking both popular opinion and the pronouncements of experts. While Victorian experts are not ready replicas of those of today, an unease about the trustworthiness and validity of expert testimony is
discernible in both periods, arguably because expert testimony sought (and seeks) to replace the judgment of peers, especially in the higher courts.

The print dialogue promoted contemporary understandings of how the legal system worked to define the boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable behavior by relating incidents and transgressions to society as a whole. What has been demonstrated is the essentially fluid nature of much of what is considered “criminal” at any point in time, something underlined by the media’s continuing focus on scandals and their ready metamorphosis into a larger scale panic, sustained and disseminated by the ensuing rhetoric of moral outrage produced by often self-appointed social commentators. As such, these chapters have important lessons for a consideration of the (un)-certainties of the modern age.

The reality is that the topics covered in this volume are not, despite Victorian perceptions to the contrary, new or original in terms of the offensive conduct covered; it is the discourse context of the perceived threats they presented to society and the degree of outcry caused that provides a new academic perspective. Competing pressures tended to ensure that the results of popular outcry (in terms of legislation and practice) were at best mixed, and often virtually ineffective, something which modern society is relearning. The public persona of the Victorian age was that it was a moral age. Many later scholars identify it as an age of moral certainties. The evidence of these chapters reveals it to be rather different, certainly in its own perception of itself at times of crisis. Equally, then, how different is the present confusion? If our morality is more secular and our confidence in its “rightness” when compared to other ages is apparently no less, when uncertainties creep in as a result of events which shake social self-confidence, such as major political or commercial scandals, media endorsement of that state of uncertainty only reinforces that perspective.³

What this volume, with its echoes from the past, reveals is the enduring nature of types both of offensive conduct and offenders and the importance of the media in providing a platform where discourse can be mediated between various interest groups and the mass of public reaction. Then there was the question of appropriate and effective “punishment” for transgressors, including the vexed question of deterrence. After all, one important reason why these various types of crime and bad behavior received a high public profile was the fear that, left uncontrolled, they would threaten the prosperity and stability of the community and the nation. An important dilemma thus arose—how to deter and to punish without destroying that spirit of initiative which also underpinned the wealth and health of the country and its individuals. Social and cultural controls were portrayed in the news media as having failed. Sometimes, this encouraged calls for new legislation, or
improvements to the existing workings of the legal system, in order to give the legal world the opportunity to intervene and control these expressions of bad behavior and crime—yet, as these chapters show, new legislation was regularly resisted once the peak of a panic had passed.

Graham Ferris shows us how a simultaneous analysis of both newspaper and official law reports can shed even more light on the complexities of interpreting crime and bad behavior. Linked to this, many chapters also emphasize the regular failure of legislation to eradicate bad behavior from society, despite clamor for such tools at times of perceived crisis. Each crisis, equally, evolves new terminology for what is generally an old problem. For example, David Bentley asserts that baby-farming as such no longer exists; yet the underlying problems of child care and working mothers remains current, as does the potential for associated social panic as recent high-profile cases of child mind- ing and supposed delinquent practitioners like Louise Woodward underline. Further, in the present age of corporate scandals, where “initiatives” to produce the best possible gloss fuelled recent economic booms, the current prospects of fraud and deception are an eerie reflection of the upsets and uncertainties which beset Victorians, as Paul Barnes so powerfully points out.

The vexed issue of expert testimony and its widespread ramifications was explored in many chapters, but particularly those by Ward, Morton, and Crozier. Again, they raise disquieting modern echoes, especially where events have served to modify the expected certainties of scientifically based experts as in the recent widely reported trials and appeals of mothers such as Trupti Patel and Sally Carter, accused of murdering their babies and “disguising” this as cot-deaths. Their return to the community as innocent of wrongdoing has prompted the media to find new scapegoats in the shape of medical experts who played leading roles in the prosecution. As Simon Jenkins commented of the trial of Trupti Patel, which he described as a trial resembling the Salem witch hunt trials, “This mother was acquitted with little thanks to science.”4 There was and is an underlying tendency for expert testimony to be regarded with hostility by a wider public less educated in the niceties of intellectual disagreement, arguably because it is seen as superseding the role of wider society to make the necessary judgments about where the boundaries lie at any one time between guilt and innocence. This, certainly, is suggested by the far from flattering comments on expert testimony and intellectual disagreement which, then as now, characterize media coverage of these. Linked to this, the impact of gender on the “believability” of testimony in court, and on the interpretation of the behavior of defendants and accusers, remains significant, as chapters from Edwards, Stevenson, and Gleeson unhappily remind us, removing the temptation to complacency about how much society has “improved” in its attitude towards vulnerable groups.
Equally, Taylor’s examination of the presentation of the Victorian versions of the modern underclasses has interesting echoes for present-day attempts to classify criminality on the one hand, and on the other, to provide some reassurance through the contribution of the forces of law and order in guarding the lives and property of respectable citizens. Sergeant Field is no longer a reassuring image for many, again possibly because the police force has in some way become professionalized and so more distant (even alienated) from everyday society. Indeed, the issue of alienation of supposedly identifiable groups of “others” is another theme with powerful resonances for modern society. The Victorian popular villains who were never out of the news for long were the Irish, and the media reinforcement of popular stereotypes hampered realistic assessments of this group and the threat it posed—something to consider when exploring current dimensions for similarly stereotyped groups at the start of the twenty-first century. As D’Cruze, Swift, and Rowbotham reveal, certainties and complacency about the moral validity of our own society can be shaken by conduct which does not match expectations and ideologies, and the media plays a key role in evolving strategies to reconcile these—strategies which may not be “just” in any dispassionate sense, but which restore a balance of consent.

It is easy to blame the modern media for the faults and prejudices of the society it serves. A high moral tone is often taken by members of the public (as Moses’s chapter exemplifies) and even members of the media in condemning the press for falsely creating panics, and serving the cause of injustice, as in the case of the furor over the treatment meted out to the killers of James Bulger. That debate existed in Victorian times as Abbott highlights, but interestingly, modern scholars do not blame the Victorian media for creating the prejudices and hypocrisies of that age. What these chapters indicate is the extent to which the media of an age is complicit in the discourse it produces for popular consumption, but does not bear sole responsibility for the ideas and ideologies it purveys. The press did not create the incidents highlighted in this collection, or the genuine alarm they aroused, but it undoubtedly magnified what were often (though by no means always) quite small-scale problems into issues of national significance. Just as the Victorians, we read and watch consciously, making choices about the nature of our consumption. Victorian newspapers did not create a social appetite for “bad” news—nor do their modern counterparts. That appetite exists because society wishes to acquire information about the extent of disorder afflicting it, and a forum for
exchange of ideas about strategies to deal with disorder. The texts in the Appendix which follow this Epilogue reveal this reality very powerfully.

Notes


2. For more details on the layout of Victorian newspapers, see Laurel Brake, Alex Jones, and Lionel Madden, eds., Investigating Victorian Journalism (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990); Wiener, ed., Papers for the Millions.

3. This epilogue is written at such a time in British history, where the Hutton Enquiry into the death of Iraq weapons expert Dr. David Kelly has thrown an unflattering light on Prime Minister Tony Blair and on the current political establishment, according to the majority of media comment. See, for example, Sunday Telegraph, 31 August 2003; The Independent on Sunday, 31 August 2003; Mail on Sunday, 31 August 2003.


