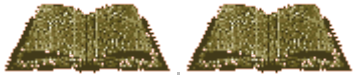
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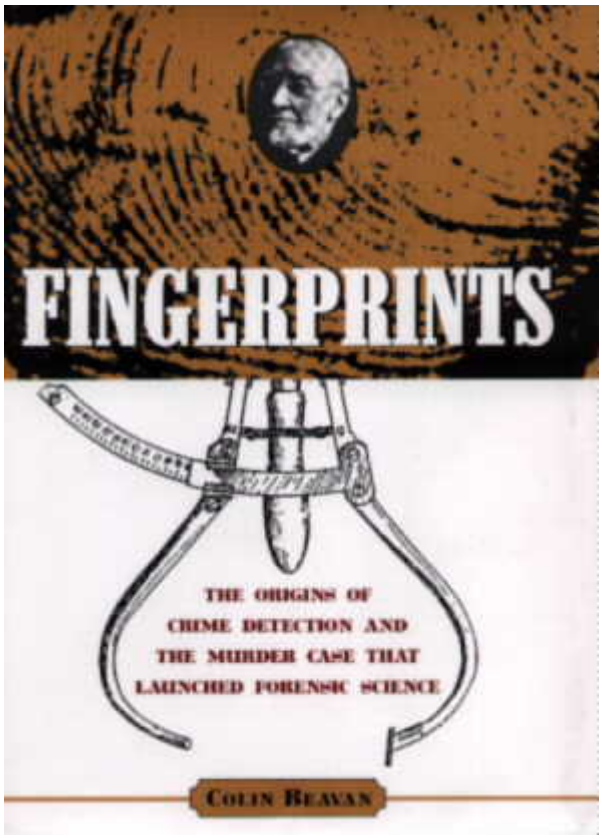
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Fingerprints - The Origins of Crime Detection and the Murder Case that Launched Forensic Science *by* Colin Beavan
Hyperion, 77 West 66th Street, 11th Floor, New York, NY 10023; 232 Pages: ISBN 0-7868-6607-1: Hardback edition, May 2001: Price $22.95US/$32.95CAN

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"To write the history of identification is to write the history of criminology", so wrote the great French Criminologist, Edmond Locard (1877-1966). In the modern era, when fingerprinting as a means of identification is taken for granted, we may not realize there was a time, when wrong people were sent to jail - even perhaps hanged - simply because there was no surefire means of identification. You can see below left for some photographs of a very interesting case from this book. In this case an innocent person Adolph Beck had to suffer an imprisonment of five years (from 1896 till 1901), simply because he was confused for a different character John Smith. Three years later it was discovered that he had been imprioned wrongly! A highly embarrassed Home Office pardoned him unconditionally on July 19, 1904 and gave him a compensation of 5,000 Pounds Sterling. But could this pittance give him back his years?

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This and many other similar cases occurred simply because there was no foolproof method of identification. Scientists, criminologists and thinkers the world over tinkered with fascinating methods such as body odors, ear size and shapes, the color of irises and so on, but none proved foolproof. Until fingerprinting came along. Lately more sophisticated techniques such as DNA profiling have also come, but fingerprinting remains the most popular. So important - and popular - is the science of fingerprinting to this day, that one of the papers published in this journal on fingerprinting has been the most visited paper, and has even bagged an award. In our inaugural issue, we published a paper on poroscopy - an offshoot of fingerprinting - and even this was the most visited paper on our journal. But these were the papers mostly on technical aspects of fingerprinting, and did not deal much with their history. I got to read a detailed history of fingerprinting for the first time in Beavan's book. One could never realize the history of identification could be so fascinating, until one came across the book under review.

Colin Beavan
Colin Beavan, the author,


received his Ph.D. in applied physics from the University of Liverpool and lives in New York. This is his first book.

Fingerprints - The Origins of Crime Detection and the Murder Case that Launched Forensic Science by Colin Beavan is a fascinating little book, which kept me spellbound for almost a week, and I believe will do so to almost everyone else. In June and July I was having my summer vacations, and I had hoped to complete some pending tasks. But meanwhile this book arrived for review. I started reading it nonchalantly, without realizing in the least that the book would stick on to me till I read it through. I did spend a week reading it, but in the end emerged a lot more knowledgeable.

Although the book is entitled "Fingerprints", it may not be wrong to say that it is actually a history of Identification itself. Among other things, we find a full chapter dedicated to Bertillon's Anthropometry, which has nothing to do with fingerprints - if at all, it was actually opposed to fingerprinting as a method of Identification.

Adolph Beck (top) who was confused for John Smith (below)





After reading this book, I realized that Beavan is a master storyteller. One of the crafts he uses in story telling is to keep shifting you back and forth in time and place, at his own will. At one time you find yourself in 20th Century London, but immediately in the next chapter you find yourself in a 6th Century French village. Nevertheless wherever he takes you, in the end he gently parachutes

you down to the same time - a quarter century between 1880 and 1905, the period of maximum turmoil and change in the history of identification. Readers may be surprised that Beavan is actually a doctor of applied physics, and this is Beavan's first book, and yet the authority with which he writes would have made one think, he was a seasoned historian of crime.

Henry Faulds (1843-1930), the underdog of Fingerprinting



One of the purposes of this book - one realizes after going through it - is to campaign for Henry Faulds, the underdog of Fingerprinting, and to give him his right place in the history of fingerprinting. This is apparent the moment one sees the cover of the book, where the only picture that appears is that of Faulds. Galton's and Herschel's pictures have been omitted - perhaps deliberately. Beavan tells us in his section on "*Acknowledgments*" that for this purpose, he even visited Fauld's only surviving relatives - his great-nephew Robert Stewart, and great-niece, Catherine Stewart, both of whom "let me rummage through old family papers". Good work, for nobody today remembers his name in connection with fingerprinting. I know it for sure. I have been an examiner in Forensic Medicine at most Indian Universities, and whenever we ask a question on the history of fingerprinting, we expect the following answer, "William Herschel originated the system and Francis Galton systematized it". So much is the ignorance about Henry Faulds, even in the teaching faculty, that if a smart student were to utter Henry Faulds' name, he would probably get negative marking! For the first time, I came to know - through this book - that this was as a result of a conspiracy, a kind of secret pact hatched between Herschel and Galton. And how have they succeeded!

The book starts with the case which - as Beavan tells us - launched forensic science. But he doesn't tell you the case straight; he splits it up instead in two halves and pastes the second half at the end of the book. The rest of the book is "sandwiched" - quite deftly - between these two halves.

Melville Macnaghten, Scotland Yard's Assistant Commissioner



In the first chapter we find ourselves in early 20th Century London, where an old couple - Thomas Farrow, 71 and Ann Farrow, 65 - is found murdered (to be sure, Ann dies a few days later), in their paint shop, which doubled up as their house too. The shop is ransacked and all the cash is gone. This happens at about 7.15 am on 27 March 1905. There are no eyewitnesses, but Scotland Yard's Assistant Commissioner Melville Macnaghten finds a faint thumbprint on the undersurface of the cash box tray. He had just begun dabbling in this new science, which the traditionalists still viewed with suspicion and often disparagingly referred to it as "scientific palmistry". They could never imagine that a jury could send a man to gallows on the "evidence of a gob of sweat smeared on a piece of metal". Nevertheless he confiscates this tray and sends it to Detective-Inspector Charles Stockley Collins to study that thumbprint. Meanwhile some witnesses surface, asserting that at the time of murder they had seen two men matching the description of brothers Alfred Stratton, 22 and his younger brother Albert, 20 running away from Farrows' shop. The brothers are caught, and sure enough, the thumbprint of Alfred matches the one found on the tray. By this time, Edward Richard Henry, the Commissioner of Scotland Yard is involved deeply in the case too. He is encouraged by this matching and hopes to win this case. There was a catch though. At no point in time before - in British legal history at least - had a conviction for murder been awarded on the evidence of a fingerprint. In a burglary case, yes, but not in murder. If Henry - and the Scotland Yard - won this case, this could launch fingerprinting as a valid means of identification. But would this ever happen?

Edward Richard Henry (1850-1931), the Commissioner of Scotland Yard



The chapter ends here, and in the next chapter the curious reader - instead of going on with the case - finds that he has been catapulted back in time and place - to a 6th Century French village, where two priests are conducting an ordeal by fire. This initially confounded me completely, but later I realized that Beavan uses this interesting technique quite often to keep the reader spellbound. I am not sure, if he uses it on purpose, but certainly it has a spellbinding effect on the reader. The argument is between a Catholic deacon and an Arian priest, and the question to be decided is "which faith is Superior". They have to dip their hands in a cauldron full of boiling water and fish out a ring. This was the usual "forensic technique" which was applied by the judges to find out the true criminal too. The suspect would be asked to fish out a ring from a similar cauldron, and then his seared limb would be swathed in bandages. The bandages would be opened after three

days, and if the wound had infected, the suspect was the actual criminal! However funny this technique may seem to you now, it made perfect sense to the people of Middle Ages. Beavan argues that despite having sacrificed an innocent life or two at times, this technique did help to keep tribal wars at bay, since this was a technique commonly agreed to among the various communities.

Eugène Vidocq (1775-1857)



The first police organization to be built on scientific lines was in 1812. It was France's *Brigade de la Sûreté*, better known simply as *Sûreté*. Paradoxically only a criminal could get a job here, as it was believed that a crook was needed to catch a crook. Indeed the organization's chief Eugène Vidocq (1775-1857), was a one time crook himself. In chapter 2 Beavan shows how Vidocq helps find Napoleon an emerald necklace. Perhaps for the first time in history, ancient, irrational methods were done away with, and a scientific method applied. For the first time in history, Vidocq used the now much used "undercover" method. This era sowed the seeds for the arrival of fingerprinting half a century later.

William James Herschel (1833-1917) (above) took Konai's hand print (below) as early as 1858. But this was merely a civil contract. Beavan argues in his book, that he never used fingerprints or palmprints for *Criminal* Identification.





William James Herschel (1833-1917) is the first major figure to loom on the fingerprinting scene, and chapter 3 deals mainly with his life. An Indian Civil Service Officer posted in Hooghly district of Calcutta, India, he was the first to take the palm print of an Indian contractor Raj Konai, in the hope that he would not go back on his promise of supplying road building material to the Government. This was done in 1858, and for most of his life, Herschel is supposed to have flaunted that print as a proof that he was the one to have thought of fingerprinting first as a method of identification. But Beavan reminds us of several flaws in his claim. For one thing, Herschel used these prints more as a means of intimidation than as a real means of identification. Although he was regularly taking fingerprints of persons on deed certificates, no one ever went back on his promise. This was perhaps because the Indian natives were too afraid. Had anyone gone back on his promise, it is doubtful if Herschel could have proved the identity beyond doubt. Secondly, Herschel never suggested their use for criminal identification; they were merely used for civil contracts. And finally Herschel never suggested that fingerprints could be lifted from the scene of crime and could be compared. Yet despite all his shortcomings, one can not take away all credit from him. He was the first one to make a systematic collection of fingerprints over a period of time and was able to show the permanence of fingerprints over years. It was perhaps here that he scored a point over Faulds.

Francis Galton (1822-1911). He is supposed to be the main villain in the Fingerprint story.



Although Faulds was the first one to publish a paper on the use of fingerprinting as a means of criminal identification, he was not able to show that the fingerprints remained unchanged over a period of time. From the account given in the book, it also appears that Herschel was not as much

of a crook as Galton was. Galton reveled in usurping others' work to himself. The book gives a number of instances when Galton cheated his fellow-beings and friends, and left them out in the cold after he was through with them. Galton dabbled in almost every intellectual endeavor; he could afford to do so as he had inherited a large amount of money and did not have to work for living. After Henry Faulds published his paper in 28 October 1880 issue of *Nature* on the possible use of fingerprinting, Galton suddenly rose from slumber and started developing it further. Herschel provided him with his large collection of prints which he had collected over the years, and it was then, that a secret pact was hatched between the two; Herschel would be designated the originator of the system, and Galton the developer. Since Galton came from an aristocratic family, he had just the right contacts, to cement this belief further in the minds of those who mattered. When Troup Committee was formed in 1893 to look into the best method of identification, the Committee recommended a hybrid system of identification - a system which incorporated some tenets of Bertillonage and some of dactylography. Interestingly Troup Committee, which had Charles Troup, the then Home Secretary as its chairman, too gave credit to Herschel and Galton as originators and developers of the system respectively, leaving Faulds out in the cold!

Henry Faulds as a defeated old man



Much of the rest of the book describes a vain attempt by Faulds to try to prove to the world that some credit must be given to him in the discovery, but nobody was interested in listening. The attitude of everyone was that "the issue had already been decided".

So stung was Faulds with this "treachery" that he went to the extent of testifying against fingerprinting in the Stratton case - the case that was to launch fingerprinting. One can only imagine the frustration of a person testifying against something for the development of which he had devoted his whole life!

The case saw some big figures sparring on opposite sides - Detective Inspector Charles Collins and Edward Richard Henry on the side of the prosecution and Dr. John Garson and Dr. Henry Faulds on the side of defense. What happened to the case? Did the jury find the brothers guilty? Or did they acquit the brothers and recommended fingerprinting for future cases only? Did Faulds lose

this last battle too? How exactly did the case launch forensic science? I wouldn't spoil the fun. The readers would perhaps like to know for themselves by reading the book.

This is undoubtedly one of the best books on fingerprints that I have read in years, and I thoroughly enjoyed it. I believe everyone who is interested in the history of fingerprinting or of criminology would find this book fascinating. Even if you are not interested in either of these, you might want to read it for simple plain fun. Highly recommended reading.

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