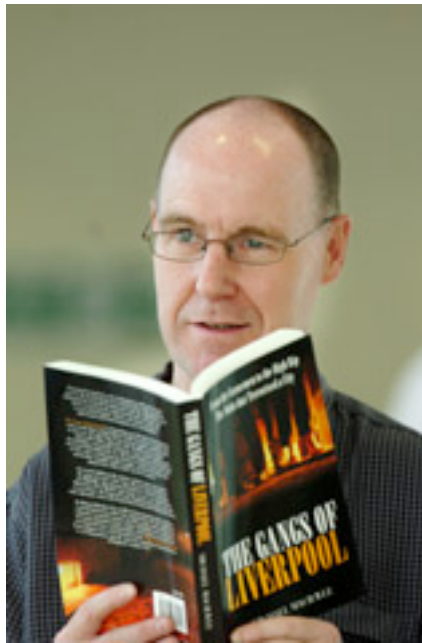


## The Gangs of Liverpool



THE Tory leader David Cameron's view that we should all "hug a hoodie" instead of reviling those dressed in such fashions, strikes a chord with historical writer Michael Macilwee.

As the author of a new book called *The Gangs of Liverpool*, dealing with ne'er-do-wells of the late Victorian era, Michael believes that the debate about street crime has barely moved on.

The familiarity of the arguments are both reassuring, that in one sense previous societies faced the same battles, and depressing, in that we have been unable to resolve such appalling behaviour.

"One thing deeply struck me while researching the reaction to the muggings and gang rampaging by the press and public is that in some ways nothing has changed," says Michael, from West Derby.

"The debate gets polarised into those who think the answer is more youth clubs, better education and housing, versus those who think that the solution is more police and tougher sentences. We seem to be no closer to resolving the situation of street crime than they were back then when these crimes were played out in the 1880s.

"The Liverpool grandee William Henry Picton started the Gordon Works Institute and I've helped run a boxing club in Huyton, many of which were set up as a way of channelling young male energy in a socially acceptable way.

"David Cameron's advice to 'hug a hoodie' instead of despising them has its parallels back in 1874 when outraged middle class readers of the Daily Post were writing of the need to meet the Cornermen gang members, buy them a loaf of bread and reason with them, or build new housing for this underclass.

"Among the judiciary, Justice Day was known as the 'flogging judge', but Recorder Hopwood QC was regarded as too lenient. Arguments raged over what was the most effective deterrent: harder sentences or softer options." Such was the dichotomy that there was even a rhyme about the two men set to the tune of Marie Lloyd's music hall hit "Oh, Mr Porter".

Michael, 46, who works as a library cataloguer at Liverpool John Moores University, had long been fascinated by a tragic attack that occurred in the road where he once worked, Tithebarn Street.

"I work over the road from where this murder happened. I started researching the circumstances, getting drawn further and further into the story. It eventually culminated in this book," says Michael.

The story, soon labeled the "Tithebarn Street Outrage", concerns a couple, Richard and Alice Morgan who on the 1874 August Bank Holiday were suddenly attacked by street thugs.

"This was a first. As far as I can tell, it was a unique incident for strangers to be set upon by people they didn't know," says Michael, who has an MA in Victorian literature. "It happened in daylight, on a major city street, not up a back alley in the dark. People were watching and it was a real shock, now as then, to learn that many were encouraging the attack and others joined in with this appalling violence.

"There was a question about whether the incident was to do with gangs. These were poor people from terrible housing conditions who used to hang round street corners.

"The victims were also poor, but respectable. The whole thing turned on the continuing influx of Irish. There was criticism that these Irish immigrants were perpetuating the lawless lifestyle through big families which bred uncontrollable youngsters.

"The newspapers were saying we ought to keep tighter control of immigration, though doubtless the many of these Irish found themselves in a brutalised state by the circumstances they had and were enduring.

"Most murders are committed between people who know each other, a concept which was also accepted back in Victorian times. The idea of strangers beating each other up for no reason was an outrage unheard of, and for years later the newspapers kept referring back to Richard Morgan's death on Tithebarn Street."

It would appear the Morgan murder was caused by a loosely related group of youths, whereas more sinister organised gangs started to appear in Liverpool about a decade later.

From the street gangs came the Hibernians, Dead Rabbits and Cornermen, often fuelled by sectarian religious intolerance.

Most infamous was the High Rip gang, who stabbed a sailor to death, in 1884. This gang was supposed to be organised and that caused an extra fear for the law-abiding citizens of Liverpool.

"There were small organised groups with their own codes and hand signals and an oath, but such was the public obsession with the High Rip Gang that at one point, every violent crime seemed to be attributed to them," says Michael.

"Newspapers, led by the Daily Post, couldn't publish enough bloodthirsty tales of the gang. Typical headlines included 'High Rip Terrorism', 'High Ripping in Marybone' and 'The High Rip Outrage at Aintree'."

The Aintree "outrage" was the frightening sight of 150 - 200 High Rippers marching up to Walton Prison hoping to kick a "grasser" to death.

"The gang consisted of youngish lads between 15 and 20 years of age, who used to plan crimes in quite a detailed way," says Michael.

"They knew where the police were, they had look-outs and specialised in beating up and robbing dockers.

"They knew how much he'd been paid, how many days he'd worked, where he lived and his route home. There were plenty of revenge attacks on people who gave evidence against the gang to police or in court. They used to try and silence witnesses, the most obvious being the Walton Prison march."

There were frequent stabbings and the gang members wore belts with buckles sharpened, which brought into use with the 'Belts off, boys'. One had his eye split open hit by one of these belts. big rivalry occurred between High Rip gang and the gwood Men, first mentioned in 1885 newspapers, who to be more of a vigilante They were allegedly med to counter attack the Rippers as they terrorised Scotland Road area.

There are accounts of breaking into a house 'We're the Logwood ', but they may have just using the name to cause terror," says Michael. The High Rip gang's reign of ror reached a bloody climax in when it went on rampage Scotland Road. They burst into shops, shop owners, robbed from pawn brokers and, one incident, punched a baby, by the shopkeeper's arms, who set up the "Me baby's killed". Another was assaulted and many were stabbed.

The gang was probably the first generation of youths born of Irish parents, mainly living around the Scotland Road area, stretching from Islington right up Great Howard Street to Bootle," says Michael.

"There is a debate on one single gang or several, as cover so many areas. Different gangs calling themselves the High Rips to cash in on the fear the name provoked.

"This was the end of the gang. They came before Judge John Day - 'the flogging judge' - and members received sentences

such as flogging, whipping and 15 years in jail put an end to the gang. Again, there as political debate and lots of letters to the press complaining about this High Rip rampage, saying the Army should be brought in. The public were certainly alarmed. It was big headline news at the time.

"The people the gang was robbing were their own kind. Many of them had jobs on the docks, like scalers (cleaning ships' boilers and hulls), which were tough, but there was no justification for their violence.

"Another problem was that so many carried knives for their jobs, tucked in big thick belts and whenever there was trouble their knives came out.

"I was surprised in my researches by the sheer poverty and atrocious housing conditions. Modern conditions do not compare to what these people suffered. Those children that stole from shops really were starving. This book ends in 1890 and I would like to bring it up to date with the Peanut gang and Swallow gang, which are both shrouded in mythology. Some members are believed to be still alive in their 80s.

"While violent street robbery dropped off, burglary of big new suburban middle class houses and the growth of fraud started to rise - but that's a whole different story."