

Main ideas of the great train robbery novel

[Law](#), [Crime](#)



In the novel *The Great Train Robbery* by Michael Crichton, the illicit actions of ordinary citizens in Victorian London were commonplace. Mid 19th century English society was marred by pervasive malfeasance. The types of unlawful activities ranged from petty pick-pocketing to full scale mastermind plots, such as the one the reader follows in *The Great Train Robbery*. Although many at the time believed that crime stemmed from rampant poverty and was the doing of the impoverished, it was also committed by well-off citizens. This ubiquitous criminality was quite difficult for the Metropolitan Police to bridle. The “organized” police force was a recently developed social institution with many inherent flaws in its infancy. Founded in 1829 by Sir Robert Peel, the London police force was centered in Scotland Yard/Whitehall, a small geographical area that only constituted a small section of London. Thus, the force had great difficulty in carrying out its charge of “police crimes in an area of nearly seven hundred square miles, containing a population of two and a half million people” (158). The laws of the time also provided little help to curb crime, as rules could be circumvented with ease. Therefore, despite the presence of both laws and the nascent police force in mid 19th century London, citizens were not only transgressing the law on a regular basis, but also evading punishment by outmaneuvering the rules and law enforcement officers.

One of the methods in which the citizens of Victorian London eluded penalties was through the bending of the defective laws. For example, a man named Andrew Taggart participated in the illegal act of disposing of counterfeit money. His wife, Mary Maxwell was also a “coiner” specializing in small silver coins. So, in 1847, when the police caught her blatantly

participating in this illegal act, she used an aspect of the legal system to aid her: “ At this time women did not have the right to vote, own property, or to make wills, and the earnings of any married woman who was separated from her husband were still legally the property of her husband..... By law, a husband was responsible for any criminal activities of his wife” (109). Thus, even though Mary Maxwell was an obvious criminal, she was able to escape the punishment of jail time through a flawed law. Instead, “ Andrew Taggart was arrested and convicted of counterfeiting currency and sentenced to eight years in Bridewell prison; Mary Maxwell was released without so much as a reprimand” (110). This law represented London as a whole, in which positive steps were being taken for social order but the juvenile laws were still riddled with flaws.

Another way in which criminals avoided reprimand was by bribing law enforcement officers. One such occurrence was when Pierce bribed Burgess, a railway guard in allowing him to carry through with the theft. Although Burgess was placed in the storage car with the purpose of guarding the luggage and safes, Pierce was able to easily bypass this security measure by merely offering Burgess money. Thus, “ Agar would again ride in the van, and while Burgess looked away Agar would open the safes, remove the gold, and replace it with lead shot” (141). Another reference in the book concerning the bribing of guards was when Clean Willy and his frequent escapes from prison were discussed. The faults in the prison system were exemplified when the book mentions that, “ A resourceful man might make a go of it from Ponsdale, where routines were notoriously lax, the walls low, and the guards not averse to the feel of gold coin and were known to look

the other way.... but never Newgate” (71). Thus, convicts could easily escape or bribe the prison guards, displaying a serious flaw in the penal system.

Although Victorian England had a law and order system in place, crime ran rampant. People were able to manipulate the law in their favor. The unsophisticated law system was in need of desperate improvement, as exemplified by the events in *The Great Train Robbery*.