

During the first days of July, 1860 people across America opened their local newspapers to read of a sensational trial in Montgomery, Alabama. An employee of the Adam's Express Company in Montgomery had been charged with the robbery of \$50,000 from the company. In 1860, \$50,000 was a huge amount of money, certainly enough to pique interest as to how someone could pull off such a robbery from a supposed vigilante company.

As the trial had progressed, there did not seem to be much of a case against the local clerk and there seemed to be growing sympathy among the Court audience that he was being made a scapegoat by a big company from the North. Then, the prosecutor called his last witness. As he walked to the stand, the defendant turned white, mumbled "I am done," then he stood up and pleaded guilty to the charge.

The last witness was a Pinkerton detective and unbeknownst to the defendant the Pinkertons had already recovered his ill-gotten loot from his wife's hiding place as described later by Allan Pinkerton to the newspaper reporters. The defendant was sentenced to ten years in an Alabama prison.

In July of 1860 Allan Pinkerton and his detective agency was little known outside of Chicago, where his company was located, but his reputation was about to grow exponentially. Within a few months of the sensational trial of an Adams' Express agent, Lincoln was elected President and the nation began to come asunder. Pinkerton and his detectives would famously save Lincoln from an assassination attempt in Maryland and Pinkerton would become known as Lincoln's detective. Actually, Pinkerton was in the employ of the railroad that Lincoln was riding to Washington, not the Government or Lincoln but to little matter. Allan Pinkerton was an ardent abolitionist and he immediately put himself and his top agents to service in the Union cause which was dutifully reported by all the newspaper reporters who traveled with the Union armies or with Lincoln. The war was won, the Union was saved and Allan Pinkerton had gained national notoriety. He was the best known detective in the world.

Following the Civil War, Pinkerton returned to Chicago where there was

ample opportunity for experienced crime fighters and detectives because there was ample crime and sundry criminals. Chicago had become the railroad center of the nation and the Federal Government was providing incentives for the construction of transcontinental railroads to increase interstate commerce; and yet there was no concomitant Federal commitment to interstate crime investigation and suppression. There were U.S. Attorneys and the Treasury Department had agents to investigate counterfeiting or custom's fraud but most crime was still the province of local constables not Federal agents. Criminals were increasingly mobile yet officers of the law remained relatively stationary. Loosely organized criminals robbed banks, trains and stole cattle and often in locales where there was little local law enforcement. For companies like Adams' Express or Wells Fargo, government was of little use, Allan Pinkerton filled the void.

Allan Pinkerton opened an office in New York City and placed his brother William in charge. By the 1880's, the National Pinkerton Detective Agency had an international presence. Only the Egg and Butter Exchange, which became the Chicago Board of Trade started a few years before Pinkerton opened his detective agency, precedes the Pinkerton National Detective Agency as a Chicago begot institution that has had an international impact.

Allan Pinkerton continued to pioneer crime investigation and establish the profession of private detective. His company logo of an open eye coupled with the motto "the eye that never sleeps" is credited with giving rise to the term "private eye." In Chicago, newspaper reporters referred to Pinkerton's company simply as "the eye." Allan Pinkerton had been the first detective on the Chicago Police Department but he did not think much of Government detectives. They seemed to him more interested in socializing with clients than solving crimes. There were private detectives who preceded Allan Pinkerton but it was he who established the model of the private detective and he soon had competition.

In the 1860's James Mooney and John Boland founded the Mooney & Boland Detective Agency and by 1882 they had opened a Chicago office with James Mooney in charge. He would spend the rest of his life living in Chicago and became a prominent citizen. It would be Mooney & Boland that Chicago playwright and real estate developer,

Samuel Eberly Gross retained to prove that Edmund Rostand had plagiarized Gross's *Merchant Prince of Cornville*, for *Cyrano de Bergerac*, an endeavor in which the detectives were quite successful. The State's Attorney retained Mooney to investigate several corrupt Alderman and he successfully obtained evidence to put the boodlers in jail. While the Pinkerton detective agency was probably better known, Mooney & Boland ultimately became the bigger of the two and there was a lively competition. In matters of commercial disputes, it was not unusual for one of the opposing sides to retain Pinkerton while the other retained Mooney. Thus, it happened more than once that a detective was arresting another detective.

In 1874, W. B. Keen, Cooke & Co a small Chicago publisher, released Allan Pinkerton's *The Detective and the Expressman*. For those who had read their newspapers in July of 1860 and were curious as to how Pinkerton could solve a case with no witnesses or crime scene evidence, his memoir would meticulously detail persons and events. *The Detective and the Expressman* was quickly followed by three other books from W. B. Keen, Cooke & Co: *Claude Melnotte as a Detective*, *The Detective and the Somnambulist (Sleepwalker)*, and *The Detective and the Fortuneteller*.

Alan Pinkerton had written memoirs from his case files but what he had actually begot was the "true detective" genre, or subgenre, of popular fiction. Pinkerton's first book, *the Detective and the Expressman*, held strictly to fact. The real names of the suspects, the detectives and the client were used. It was very much a documentary of a crime and how it was solved. In Pinkerton's second book, *Claude Melnotte as a Detective*, Pinkerton admits his postscript is based not on fact but what he imagines will occur and he has changed all the names of his clients who were crime victims in Chicago "for obvious reasons," although the crime scene, the Clifton Hotel, is the real place. In succeeding memoir stories, such as *The Detective and the Sleepwalker*, the same was true, or as Pinkerton admitted in the preface: "In some very minor details, a small ingredient of fiction has been introduced, but the accuracy of the story has not been perceptibly affected thereby". In reality, he has moved down the path from non-fiction to fiction, from memoir to literature; and as he opened the path, others soon followed.

The crime story, of course, is nothing new. As crime is the abiding

companion of mankind, the crime story goes back to creation. The story of Cain and Abel is probably the best known crime story although it wasn't much of a mystery and there was no detective. Literary historians generally credit Edgar Allan Poe as the father of the modern American mystery novel with the publication of his *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*. And one of Poe's last works was a murder mystery based upon a real and brutal murder of a young shop girl in New York City that had garnered a great deal of newspaper attention. In fact, the Mystery Writers of America honored Poe by naming their award for achievement after him.

While Edgar Allan Poe is still regarded as one of America's premier storytellers and is certainly worthy of remembrance in the nomenclature of an award, the claim for patrimony of the true detective story is weak. *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* with a violent ape as a villain is hardly "true" nor is Poe's sleuth a professional detective. Poe was a master of gothic horror but less influential as a writer of crime mysteries. Nor did Poe's mysteries beget a new movement in popular fiction. The fiction factories of New York published more Westerns than mysteries during the dime novel era after Poe had passed away. The best known fictional dime novel detective was *Old Sleuth* whose first release was in 1872 and well after the exploits of Allan Pinkerton had gained currency.

Poe's mystery stories in the 1840's simply had little impact on the popular fiction publishing industry; not so, with the memoirs of Allan Pinkerton. His Chicago publisher would claim that the inaugural to the series, *The Detective and the Expressman*, had caused a sensation selling fifteen thousand copies in less than sixty days and twenty thousand in the first year. Big numbers for a much smaller nation. Other publishers in Chicago took notice and within months more "true detective" stories were on the market. Donnelley, Gasselte & Loyd, a predecessor company to the several Donnelley companies, issued *Shadowed by Three* which launched the near four decade career of Emma Murdoch Van Deventer under the pseudonym Lawrence L. Lynch. And thus was established a long tradition in Chicago of women detective story writers.

W.B. Keen, Cooke & Co. had launched a franchise author and begot a new popular fiction movement. Unfortunately, they would not be

around to reap what they had sowed. In 1877, they went into bankruptcy and a year later, their creditors had the company liquidated. W. B. Keene and D. B. Cooke had started with competing bookstores on Chicago's first "book row," Lake Street in the 1850's. They merged their stores and made the move to State Street when that great street surpassed Lake Street as Chicago's premier retail district. It was not uncommon for bookstores to assay publishing and W. B. Keen, Cooke & Co.'s first attempt with Pinkerton was commercially successful but still not enough to save the company. They were burdened with debt caused by the loss of all their inventory in the Great Fire of 1871. Allan Pinkerton was quickly signed by an Eastern publisher and would author some forty books in the course of less than a decade. One newspaper reporter claimed that forty percent of Pinkerton's revenue came from his literary activities. Since it was a privately owned company, there is no way a reporter could have known what Pinkerton made and it seems to be hyperbole.

With forty stories, or memoirs, in about eight years, Allan Pinkerton had established, or at least exposed, a substantial market for true detective stories causing new publishers to fill the breach left by the demise of W. B. Keene, Cooke & Co. Donnelley, Gasselte & Loyd, who had been the printer for W. B. Keen, Cooke & Co.'s first Pinkerton memoirs, issued a few detective novels under their Lakeside Series imprint. Another Chicago commercial printer, Rand, McNally, commenced literary publishing in the late 1870's. Their imprint for detective stories was the Globe Detective Series. In 1882, the same year that Allan Pinkerton passed away, a new Chicago publishing house, Laird & Lee, commenced publication of their Pinkerton Detective Series with an association with William "Billy" Pinkerton who assumed control of the company his father and uncle had built. Shortly thereafter, Chicago-based Belford, Clarke, which was believed to be the largest literary publisher in the country, began their Mooney & Boland Detective Series based on true cases that James Mooney had solved.

The commonality in these detective series is that the publishers all claimed them to be "true." The author of *Suppressed Sensations*, probably the most commercially successful book in the Globe series, claimed: "For obvious reasons some changes have been made in names and locations, but the tales are substantially what they purport to be: Leaves from the Notebook of a Reporter." *The Rival Detectives*,

the third issue in the Globe Detective Series, was promoted by Rand, McNally as “an American novel based on fact.” And indeed, the story seemed to mirror an actual case from Chicago’s rural periphery where a farmer was murdered and it was discovered, as the newspapers put it, that the victim had “one wife too many.” The true detective mysteries usually had associations that would seem familiar to anyone who even casually read the daily newspapers. If the story wasn’t directly based on an actual case as the Mooney and Boland Detective Series was, then the author would attempt to invoke some type of connection to someone or something that was actually real to achieve story verisimilitude.

Perhaps the master of this strategy was Laird & Lee. The first true detective mystery in their Pinkerton Detective Series was *Jim Cummings, Or the Great Adam’s Express Robbery*. Jim Cummings was an actual person who had gained a great deal of celebrity, or notoriety, as a member of the Jesse James gang. At the time of the novel’s publication he had moved to Leadville, Colorado where he claimed to have given up a life of crime although some of his fellow citizens came to doubt that. The detectives in the story were led by Billy Pinkerton who was of course very real. The story was not a reprise of an actual event but a composite of actual events. There had been an outbreak of train robberies in Western Illinois and Iowa in the preceding years so the story of a train robbery would seem authentic.

The Pinkerton Detective mysteries were often composites of actual events with thinly veiled characters based on recognizable people although there is much fiction in the story. In *the Runaway Wife*, a picture of Captain Simon O’Donnell is prominently displayed and the story is promoted as “from the diary of Captain Simon O’Donnell of the Chicago Police.” Every citizen in Chicago knew of and admired Simon O’Donnell, with the exception of course of the criminals who attempted a number of times to kill him. O’Donnell was a real person and he was a character in the story but the story itself was a mix of pure fiction coupled with thinly veiled real villains and places like the encampment in lumber country where women were forced into prostitution and disappeared in an unmarked graveyard. There was much truth in the fiction.

Laird & Lee always tried to connect their fictional detective stories to

something real. Besides O'Donnell, they issued another Pinkerton Detective novel as "from the diary of ex-chief Denis Simmons" who had been a real Chief of Police in Chicago. Anything that piqued public interest might be used as a connection for a Pinkerton Detective story; and nothing captured public attention in 1888 like a series of gruesome murders in the Whitechapel district of London by an unknown assailant who came to be known as Jack the Ripper. Almost immediately there was a Pinkerton Detective story called *Whitechapel* about an American detective who has an encounter with a villain who might be the ripper.

Both Rand, McNally and Laird & Lee issued non-fiction books if the subject was crime within the detective series. Rand, McNally published a book about Blinky Morgan who was a notorious criminal gang leader from Cleveland who eventually went to the gallows for robbery and the deaths of several police officers. Laird & Lee issued *Harry Tracy the Desperate Western Outlaw* in the Pinkerton Detective Series even though it was an actual eyewitness account of the pursuit and killing of Harry Tracy who was the last of the railroad robbers. It was definitely not a novel. While issuing non-fiction with a fiction imprint might risk the book's credibility, the non-fiction issues might also lend credibility to the "true" nature of the novels in the same series.

Anything that detective story devotees might recognize could be used by Laird & Lee as an attraction for a Pinkerton Detective story. In the 1880's, the copyrights issued in France and England had no legal weight in America. French author Emile Gaborieu, remembered in France as the father of the detective story, had written several detective novels the most popular being *File 113*. With a French copyright that meant nothing on this side of the Atlantic, American printers flooded the market with Gaborieu's novels. As *File 113* was so well-known, Laird & Lee published *File 114* in the Pinkerton Detective Series. Gaborieu's fictional detective Monsieur Lecoq was back solving a murder in a new book with an American copyright and an unknown author. Until Sir Arthur Conan Doyle introduced Sherlock Holmes to the world, Inspector Lecoq was the best known fictional detective in the western world.

With three large publishing houses and several smaller publishers routinely issuing several new true detective novels each month, Chicago was the national leader in true detective popular fiction; but

by the 1890's, the genre seemed to be in decline. As typical with the rise and fall of a literary genre or fad, there wasn't one factor but multiple factors both in the market and in the body politic. In 1891, the Congress passed a new copyright act in conjunction with Canada and several European nations which provided protection to foreign authors. You could no longer reprint whole works or use someone else's fictional detective as Laird & Lee had with Inspector Lecoq. Changes in print technology in the 1890's coupled with more favorable postal rates provided magazines with an advantage over books. Several of the large New York fiction factories began moving from dime novels to pulp magazines.

But perhaps the greatest change was in the evolving perception of the detective agencies with the public. Detective agencies were originally established to solve crimes. Allan Pinkerton's first memoir was an explication of how a robbery of a large financial institution was solved. Detective agencies continued to be hired to solve crimes but increasingly, beginning in the 1880's, they were hired to deter crime. They were evolving from crime fighters to security guards and that brought them into conflict with the labor movement. In 1892, a labor negotiation deteriorated into a military campaign at Andrew Carnegie's Homestead, Pennsylvania steelworks. Three hundred Pinkerton detectives were hired to regain control of the property from strikers. Ultimately the State militia had to be called in to restore law and order but only after several deaths on each side.

The Homestead steel strike was a national controversy and did nothing to burnish the reputation of the Pinkerton National Detective Agency or the private detective. There was a growing resentment in society that someone unelected or even unappointed by someone elected could possess police powers. State legislatures began to restrict the authority of the private detective. The true detective mystery stories were never targeted to the highbrow reader but rather at the middle class and working class. In the 1890's almost coeval with the Homestead tragedy the "blood and thunder" theater movement started in Chicago which used some of the same elements of melodrama found in the Pinkerton Detective stories. In *Dyke Darrell* the detective's sister is tied to a railroad track and in a *Life for a Life* the villain is trying to get a woman to marry him because he wants to sell her land to a lumber company. A ticket to a popular-price theater was actually less

than the cost to buy a book with a similar story. Both Rand, McNally and Laird & Lee continued to publish new detective mysteries during the 1890's but far less often than the previous decade; and by the first years of the new century, they both stopped altogether.

Neither has the true detective books fared well in the collective memory through the passing of time. Bibliographers and librarians routinely categorize the Globe, Pinkerton and Mooney & Boland detective series books under "dime novels" in literary catalogs. They were never dime novels. One obvious difference is that the detective novels never sold for a dime. Rand, McNally offered the Globe series by subscription for \$4 dollar a year while Laird & Lee asked for \$3. Donnelley, Rand, McNally and Laird & Lee all sold books in trains and depots using agents and Pullman porters for more than a dime while Belford, Clarke had a distribution system incorporating department stores and they all sold via mail-order. While the detective stories were not very long, usually just over a hundred pages and rarely more than two hundred, they were still longer than a typical dime novel. The books were printed in a 5 by 7 format in either soft or hardcover depending on which point of sale they were meant for.

What the detective novels were, was topical. They were written in the vernacular of the time; yes by Jove they were and it would have been deuces if they hadn't, old chap; and with a Victorian propriety in regards to women. Many of the novels were written using a fictional romance as a continuing thread to weave the true crime elements together. The women besides being incredibly naïve, once "ruined" by a scoundrel would either immediately kill themselves or seek vengeance. In just one generation later a Chicago writer of detective stories would claim the formula to the genre was: "boy meets girl, girl gets boy in pickle, boy puts pickle in girl." Yes the modern woman can't be "ruined" often enough but the detectives of the gaslight era, never even harbored a lewd thought about women. It was an age of honor that succeeding generations cannot comprehend, that and the Chicago publishers used cheap paper that deteriorated rather quickly. Only a few of the many true detective stories published in Chicago during the last two decades of the 19th century still exist today. Of the 100 original Pinkerton Detective Series novels only about twenty-five can be accounted for.