FLASH LANGUAGE

FLASH MAN

Susan Butler, Publisher of the *The Macquarie Dictionary*, looks for clues in the language of the *Registry of Flash Men* to determine whether its author, Commissioner of Sydney Police, William Augustus Miles, stayed on the right side of the law.

‘A Nice Cup of Tea and a Gorilla’ was the heading for a newspaper report on the Wood Royal Commission. The article went on to explain that a cup of tea was a clandestine way of drinking alcohol by having it served in a teapot, and that a gorilla was a bribe of $1000. There was general surprise and concern that the police and criminals shared a patois — a common colloquial language — the intuitive belief being that two groups that spoke in the same way probably thought in much the same way as well. Whose side were the cops on? The community’s or the people with whom they could talk the talk?

How far the police go in understanding criminals in their efforts to be effective police officers has always been a delicate matter of balance. From the evidence of the journal of William Miles it is evident that he went further than most in documenting the criminal milieu and, in the process, developed a sense of familiarity with that world. Can we tell from the evidence of the language that he uses whether he crossed the line or not? I think we can.

But first I would like to establish Miles as a policeman of his day, talking the jargon of his profession. It is hard for us to get the sense of the word *villain* today because we are so familiar with the modern British use of it among the police, meaning simply a criminal. But in the 1800s a villain was someone, probably of low birth, who was thought to be innately disposed to commit all kinds of horrible crimes. It has the same meaning as the contemporary usage, but with a huge dash of moral outrage.

Riff-raff were people of low class and disreputable character. A *hocus pocus man* was someone who tricked you by *leger-de-main* or sleight of hand. A *turf man* was someone who made his living on the racetrack. A *strumpet* sounds archaic to us, but to Miles was a policeman’s ordinary word for a prostitute. The expression *on the town* meant getting a living from prostitution, thieving or the like. And *an exquisite around town* was a dandy or fop. A *piece* was current slang in London for a woman regarded as a sexual object. *Insolent* was very much a policeman’s term in its basic sense of ‘disrespectful of authority’.

Mixed in with this general policeman’s jargon that Miles brought with him from London are the specific terms of Sydney administration in the years of convictism — words like *expiree, special, specialship, stockade, iron gang, exemption man, Norfolk expiree* — all of which are admirably dealt with in the glossary to the online version of the *Registry of Flash Men* text.

But now we come to the borderline between policeman’s jargon and underworld slang. This is where Miles looks across the fence and begins to describe the territory in the words which the criminals would use themselves. It is the kind of decision you make when your level of understanding outgrows the general terms available in formal English and you choose jargonistic words because they are more accurate.

The first of these is the term *flash*: ‘the cant language used by the family’ to quote James Hardy Vaux, our first lexicographer and a three-times-transported convict. If you are a *flash* person, then you are awake to what is going on, you are in the know. You are one of the crims. A *flash cove* is a thief or fence. A *flash case* is a place where ‘the family’ (community of criminals) hang out. A *flash man* is primarily someone who speaks the flash language, but in particular a prostitute’s pimp.

But there is more that Miles observed from the other side. He describes a few men as *bullies and hangers-on.* We might think we know what that means until we consult dictionaries of underworld slang and find that a *bully* is ‘a supposed husband to a bawd or whore’ and that to *hang it on* with a woman is ‘to cohabit or keep company with her without marriage’. *Fancy* refers to ‘any article universally admired for its beauty, or which the owner sets particular store by’ so ‘a woman who is the particular favourite of any man, is termed his fancy woman, and vice versa’. A *swaggerer* was a London term for what Vaux called a *bouncer* — someone who was out ‘to bully, threaten, talk loud,’ for the purposes of intimidation.

A *pall*, spelled thus in Miles’ day, was a partner in crime. Highwaymen in particular tended to operate in pairs and referred to each other as *palls.* It was the Americans who sanitised the word as far as Australians are concerned. To *sell a man* was ‘to betray him by giving information against him’. A man who fell victim to any treachery of this kind, was said to have been *sold like a bullock in Smithfield.* So when Miles remarks that his criminal contact arranges a meeting that is ‘a dead sell to the thieves’ we can, thanks to Vaux, understand what he means. The only other citation I have found for this use of *sell* is from *Oliver Twist*, so it would seem that Dickens shared Miles’ interest in the vernacular of the underworld.

The easiest thing to learn in another language is the nouns — the names for people and things. And Miles has mastered these. He goes further, using other words and phrases that would not naturally be part of the vocabulary of someone of his social standing. But he has not mastered the idiom. The language that Vaux records is full of a detail and liveliness that eludes Miles. For example *bender* — an ironic negative which functioned then in much the same way as the emphatic ‘not’ does today. ‘We did well today — bender!’ as in ‘We did well today — not!’ Or the phrase *Oliver is in town!* which brought attention to the fact that the moon was full and there was an opportunity for nefarious nighttime activities. This is the core of the flash language.

We get none of this from Miles, which is to his credit. His interest in detailing the criminal world makes fascinating reading today. But he stayed on the right side of the fence, as befits a gentleman with interests in natural history and statistics. He must have had a good ear for language and a natural curiosity which gives his journal a value to us in ways that would not have entered his mind when he was writing it.

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PHOTOS: PENELOPE CLAY; FASHION AND STYLING CHLOË FITZJAMES

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