



The Empire, the police, and the introduction of fingerprint technology in Malta

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Abstract

It required more than three decades for fingerprint technology, invented in the British colony of India, to reach the British colony of Malta. Fingerprint technology was not institutionalized in Malta until 1932 owing to a different social context; British colonial authorities tended to see the Maltese as Europeans and never regarded crime prevention as a priority. Nevertheless, a review of policing in Malta in the 19th and early 20th centuries supports the thesis that fingerprint-based identification was invented to maintain surveillance over 'otherness'. Although the colonial situation in Malta did not produce anything like the Criminal Tribes Act in British India, the introduction of fingerprint technology coincided with concern over foreign residents. Fingerprint technology became institutionalized following enactment of the Aliens Act in 1899 and formation of a detective and alien branch within the police organization. The diffusion of knowledge within the British Empire did not operate in a predictable direction. Rather, knowledge arising in one colony spread to others, as well as to England, channelled by familiar prejudices as much as scientific discovery.

Key Words

colonial • otherness • policing • racialization • surveillance

Throughout the 20th century, fingerprint technology represented the modern, scientific approach to criminal identification. The technique of fingerprint classification has in the 21st century surrendered this prominence to forensic DNA, but from the 1890s, when fingerprint science emerged, to the 1990s, it was *the* mark of cosmopolitan police organization. The story of how the technology developed has been told, mostly in narratives that chart advances in technique and assign credit for contributions (Thorwald, 1965; Lambourne, 1984; Beavan, 2001). But a social history has begun to emerge, and in this work it is possible to see links between the use of knowledge in society, the categorization of ‘otherness’, and political surveillance (Cole, 2001; Ruggiero, 2001; Sengoopta, 2003; Breckenridge, 2005).

Sengoopta (2003) delivers a provocative analysis of fingerprint science in relation to colonial rule, racialization, and policing. Although he aims at a popular audience, Sengoopta is an accomplished historian of science concerned with significant sociological issues (Cole, 2005: 253). Fingerprint technology, he argues, was born in British India, where the ‘curious combination of despotic rule and intense insecurity’ led colonial administrators to devise a means of identification for surveillance on a wide scale. Contrary to the image of Scotland Yard triumphing over the efforts of London’s criminal underworld to deceive them, fingerprints as a means of criminal identification did not originate at home, but abroad. The British Empire was a ‘network of people, ideas, and communication—and traffic on that network could move in either direction’ (Sengoopta, 2003: 6). In this way, fingerprint technology yields an example of the diffusion of knowledge or ‘policy transfer’ within the British Empire, and a meaningful starting point for approaching contemporary internationalism in the response to crime (Karstedt, 2002; Godfrey and Dunstill, 2005; Jones and Newburn, 2007).

To explore Sengoopta’s argument, we discuss the emergence of fingerprint technology in Malta. The Malta police did not institutionalize fingerprinting until 1932, some 35 years after the world’s first fingerprint bureau was established in Bengal. This means that it took more than three decades for the technology to travel ‘in’ from India to London and ‘out’ from London to Malta. As a depot for commercial shipping from colonies to the east (principally India), and the home of the Mediterranean Fleet, Malta was endowed with current advances in architecture, engineering, and communications. Valletta had railway service from Mdina by 1883, electric lights in 1896, an electric tramway in 1903, and telephone service (for the police) by 1897, not to mention the Royal Opera House, which opened in 1866 (Cassar, 1988). Furthermore, forensic science was well established. Stefano Zerafa became the first chair of forensic medicine at the University of Malta in 1829 and Constantino Schinas, another professor of medicine, was using a microscope to analyse blood stains as early as 1841.¹ The syllabus in forensic medicine for 1856 included wounds, poisoning, abortion, and chemistry (Cassar, 1974). What, then, explains the delay? Why did Malta adopt fingerprint technology when it did? How were conditions in colonial Malta different from colonial India?

To find the answers, we present a historical analysis covering the period from 1814 to 1932, constructed from primary materials originating in Malta, including police annual reports, findings of royal commissions, correspondence between colonial administrators, and local publications. The first section describes the writing of a criminal code and establishment of a police force. The next sections discuss the matter of ‘race’ and criminality, and the measures for surveillance of foreign residents. The final section examines the founding of the detective branch within the Malta police. We will conclude that while Malta was very different from India, the issues surrounding fingerprint technology were remarkably similar.

Law and policing

British rule over the Indian subcontinent presented a staggering prospect. The scale of the land, diversity of languages, and inscrutability (from the British point of view) of cultures, overwhelmed the first colonial administrators. The Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 confirmed how little they knew, and engendered a lingering uneasiness about their mismanagement precipitating another revolt (Sengoopta, 2003: 38). Malta presented a different prospect. The geography was tiny by comparison and the presence of the Mediterranean Fleet in the Grand Harbour meant colonial authorities could bring overwhelming military force to a conflict with the Maltese.

In Malta, the imperial project began without strategy or design. For the greater part of three centuries beginning in 1530, the Knights of the Order of St John of Jerusalem held Malta as their Mediterranean stronghold. Following defeat of the Turks in the Great Siege of 1565, the Knights fortified the Grand Harbour and invested Valletta with their cathedrals and grand-houses. In 1798, Bonaparte, en route to Egypt, took control from the Knights, but French rule ended after two years. The French, who devoted themselves to secularism, ransacked Malta’s churches for treasure; the Maltese expunged French forces, then looked to Nelson for assistance in defending themselves against retaliation. While the geo-strategic value of Valletta’s harbours was not recognized for more than a decade, the British Crown decided to ‘protect’ Malta if only to deny it to the French. Following the Peace of Paris in 1814, the Maltese Islands belonged ‘in full rights and sovereignty to His Britannic Majesty’. Malta remained under British government until 1964, when it finally achieved independence, although the last British troops did not leave Malta until 1979 (Cassar, 2000).

In the administrative language of the British Empire, Malta fit into the category of ‘Crown colony’, meaning the governor embodied the whole of civil and military authority. The first, Sir Thomas Maitland, imposed the ‘beneficent despotism’ he had perfected in governing Ceylon. Maitland ordered the emblems of the Knights to be removed from public buildings and appropriated the best of them for use by his government. The palace of the Grand Masters became the British governor’s office and the *Castellania*

palace, built by the Knights to house their law courts (and prison), served as the law courts under British rule until 1853. While the British authorities agreed to respect the practice of Catholicism, 'King Tom' ruled by proclamation. He kept the lion's share of political authority for the Crown, and the legal institutions he—and British governors to follow—introduced in Malta, denied the Maltese representation in government (Bezzina, 1985: 37). In establishing a system of criminal law, the people of Malta were meant to understand their status as subjects of a sovereign, not citizens of a republic.

But, at the same time, the authorities did not want to repeat Bonaparte's mistake. Once Malta became the base for commercial, political, and military interests in the Mediterranean, Britain could not risk losing it. British governors could not afford to alienate the people because defence of the British Navy in the Grand Harbour would require support from ordinary Maltese. Further, the Admiralty and War Department deployed thousands of personnel to Malta, which sustained a significant British population in Valletta. Malta's criminal code would need to take this into account as a not insignificant portion of those standing in the dock at the *Castellania* would be British subjects. The matter of rights had to be acknowledged in the law even if it meant that these protections would extend to the Maltese.

The attempt to balance competing interests in the writing of a criminal code absorbed decades (Harding, 1968). The second British governor, General Francis Rowden (the Marquis of Hastings), appointed Sir John Richardson to prepare a legal code. Richardson, an English judge in Malta for health reasons, submitted a partial report in 1826. This was completed by Ignazio Bonavita, Senior Judge of the Criminal Court, and his report was sent to London along with a proposed criminal code. For the proposed criminal code, Bonavita relied on the Neapolitan Code, and later revisions in the French code, both of which drew on Roman law. Several years later, Andrew Jameson, a Scottish lawyer, was commissioned to bring this code into consistency with English law. Jameson's task, as he saw it, was to infuse Bonavita's code with 'the more liberal and enlightened spirit of English criminal law'. During the period in which the islands were ruled by the Knights of St John, the criminal law had a 'severe and arbitrary character'. He sought to ensure the code preserved constitutional rights and was consistent with codes adopted in other British possessions. Banishment, whipping, torture, and transportation were to be abolished in favour of imprisonment under 'humane restrictions' (Jameson, 1843). Jameson submitted his report in 1843 and many of his alterations were adopted, but the code as finally revised was not effected until the 1850s.

The Malta police originated in 1814 when Maitland consolidated the Coast Artillery, Provincial Corps, and Police Corps into a single institution, 'the Police Corps'. He appointed Francesco Rivarola, a Corsican who had distinguished himself fighting alongside the British in the Italian campaign, as inspector general (Maitland, 1814). Quite a few changes would be made over the next century, although the governor and Colonial Office maintained a limited vision. British authorities responsible for the colonies took

an interest in police organization to the extent that it helped achieve a particular goal: order (Sinclair and Williams, 2007).

In 1836, the Secretary of State for the Colonies appointed John Austin and George Cornwall Lewis to enquire into conditions in Malta in light of local discontent with the Government. From quarters in the *Auberge d'Aragon*, they devoted a year-and-a-half, taking evidence, issuing reports, and making proposals. Their reports addressed a catalogue of issues—freedom of the press, public education, and employment of Maltese in government posts, along with court structure, prosecution, and the police. They described the distribution of policing duties across a Department of Executive Police, Magistrate of Markets, and the Royal Malta Fencible Regiment, and recommended consolidation into an expanded civil department. They prepared detailed proposals for staffing and organization of a police office, police force, and coast guard (Austin and Lewis, 1839: 15). Lewis regarded the exclusion of Maltese from government as one of the ‘main evils’ of British administration and Maltese were appointed to all ranks of the police force beginning in the mid-19th century.²

Governor Patrick Stuart prompted another re-organization in 1846 although he did not know it at the time. Stuart, a firm adherent of the Church of Scotland, issued a proclamation prohibiting celebrations of the traditional *fiesta* surrounding Ash Wednesday from occurring on Sunday. Editors of local newspapers denounced his restriction as ‘an illegal and despotic act’, and (as he explained it to Downing Street), ‘some idle and discontented young men in the city’ decided to make trouble. A crowd gathered that Sunday, under Stuart’s window at the palace, including some dressed as Protestant clergymen, and when he deployed the 42nd Regiment to ‘disperse the mob’, an affray resulted in the destruction of drum and a pipe. He denied local press reports that he had ordered two cannon at the gate of the palace to be fixed on the crowd. Following arrests of some 28 persons, leading to short prison stays and fines, the festival went forward on Monday and Tuesday ‘with the greatest good humour and without the slightest appearance of discontent’ (Stuart, 1846). Stuart soon left the island owing to ill health, and the Colonial Office filled his absence with Richard More O’Ferrall, the first Catholic of the British governors.

From the time he arrived, Governor O’Ferrall pursued a series of reforms, including opening a civil hospital at Floriana, a prison at Corradino, a poor-house in Gozo, and a number of village dispensaries, as well as a re-organized police force (Bonnici, 2000). O’Ferrall took ‘the English police force’ as his model. He reduced the number of officers and increased the number of constables; he divided constables into three classes and introduced the prospect of promotion as ‘an inducement to a better class to enter the service’. He convinced the Secretary of State for the Colonies to pay for an increase in the number of men overall; expanding the police was necessary given an increase in the population of the island, transfer of duties from the Royal Malta Fencibles Regiment to the police, and an increase in the number of strangers in Malta resulting from steam

navigation (O'Ferrall, 1849). O'Ferrall left office, however, before 1853 when the Code of Criminal Laws and Regulations of the Police took effect. The Criminal Court, Court of Magistrates of Judicial Police, and Police Office moved from the *Castellania* to the *Auberge d'Auvergne*, and the last of the prisoners at the Great Prison were transferred to the prison at Corradino he had opened in 1850.

Another significant re-organization of police followed the events of 7 June 1919. Known as the *Sette Guigno*, the date is remembered in Malta as the day when a Maltese National Assembly formed to demand independence and when British forces fired shots into a crowd killing three Maltese. British troops bayoneted another Maltese to death the following day (Frendo, 1991: 170–3). According to the official enquiry, large crowds had gathered in *Strada Reale*, Valletta's main thoroughfare, throwing missiles and breaking glass at the Union Club (flying the Union Jack), and the Public Library (overlooking a statue of Queen Victoria). On the following day, crowds attacked the office of the *Daily Malta Chronicle*, known for its pro-government views, and the houses of prominent members of the British administration. Before it was over, detachments from the Malta Composite Battery and the Royal Malta Artillery had been deployed. The Commission to enquire into the causes of the affair identified a list of grievances including escalating costs of bread and other essentials, disadvantaged working conditions at the dockyards, and a social barrier between the English and Maltese (Parnis et al., 1919a).

The police were unable, or unwilling, to restrain the crowd, suggestive of discontent within the ranks. 'The mob was certain that it would not be interfered with by the Police owing to the unrest in the force and their inclination to go on strike' (Parnis et al., 1919a: 13). Colonial officials decided they needed loyalty, even if it meant some expense in purchasing it. Within weeks, a committee was convened to address the low morale. This commission brought about an increase in wages, establishment of a cafeteria providing affordable meals, and an increase in payment for extra duty (Board of Enquiry, 1919).

Overall, the British ruled in Malta with nothing like the anxiety that followed the Sepoy Mutiny in India. The Maltese took exception to the excesses of colonial rule, particularly when it threatened their religion and livelihood. But independence was achieved without violence, and for most of the years a British governor sat in the palace of the Grand Masters, the Maltese did not make trouble.³

'Race' and criminality

For the knowledge to govern the Indian sub-continent, British administrators turned to science, and classification became the centrepiece of this approach. Colonial ethnologists inventoried 'criminal tribes' in the belief that these groups originated in ancient times and were compelled by heredity to crime as a vocation (Brown, 2001; Anderson, 2004). This sort of

research led to the Thagi and Dakaiti Department, who discovered in the 1830s and 1840s that criminality was pervasive in Indian society. It also led to the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, and as amended, the requirement to fingerprint all members of designated criminal tribes over the age of 12 (Sengoopta, 2003: 124, 146). In Malta, a parallel process did not occur. The attitudes of colonial administrators reflected a belief in cultural superiority, but there is no analogue to ‘native criminality’.

First, British observers, from the early 19th century, had difficulty deciding how to characterize the ‘natives’ of the Maltese islands. George Cornwall Lewis, who arrived in Malta in 1836, declared the inhabitants of the islands to be an Arab people based on the Maltese language. The Maltese were ‘an Arab race’ he wrote, and added: ‘physiognomy bears a striking resemblance to the Jewish’ (Lewis, 1870: 74).⁴ John Davy, a medical officer in the Army, agreed. In his *Notes and Observations on the Ionian Islands and Malta* (1842), he observed the ‘Maltese speak a dialect of Arabic and are decidedly of Arabian descent, which their dark complexion accords, as well as many of their habits and manners’ (Davy, 1842: 19). Henry Seddall also took this view. The Maltese ‘are Arabs’ he wrote in 1870; few understand Italian, most understand only ‘Arabic, their mother tongue’. And since Maltese represented ‘corrupted Arabic’, he saw no reason why it should not be replaced with English, the ‘expressive, noble language of the Anglo-Saxon race’ (Seddall, 1870: 302).⁵

But other observers were equally convinced the Maltese were Europeans. R. Montgomery Martin, in his *History of the British Possessions in the Mediterranean* (1837), pointed out that Parliament declared Malta to comprise ‘the most southerly island in Europe’. Mapmakers had included the Maltese islands with the continent of Africa, but Parliament proclaimed that ‘as regards the service of our soldiery’, Malta was part of Europe (Martin, 1837: 152). He also offered a rather different provenance for the Maltese language. The upper class spoke Italian, while the language of the common people is a ‘compound of Arabic, German, Italian and other languages’ (Martin, 1837: 236–7). As he saw it, the ‘natural industry of the Maltese [had] converted an apparently barren rock into a very picturesque country’, and in ousting the French, had proven themselves to be worthy of the rights and privileges of British subjects. The Royal Commission of 1912, appointed to enquire into commercial matters, explained the origin of the Maltese language was not known. The commissioners stated, nevertheless, the Maltese were European and ‘whiter’ than the peoples of Southern Europe:

The type is South European, but the people are fairer in colour, in the towns at any rate, and have a better appearance than South Italians or Sicilians. They are a strong, hardy race, and have the reputation of being temperate, thrifty and industrious.

(Mowatt et al., 1912: A3)

No one made the case for the Europeaness of the Maltese more than Gerald Strickland. The son of a Maltese mother and an English father,

Strickland spent his childhood in Malta before taking a degree at Cambridge. He returned to Malta to serve as Chief Secretary to Government, and later, Prime Minister of Malta. 'The object of this treatise,' he began a 1921 address delivered in Valletta, 'is to prove that the Maltese are not the descendants of a Semitic or African race.' He took particular exception to the assertion by science-fiction writer Jules Verne, who visited Malta in 1884, that the Maltese were Arabs. Strickland linked Maltese origins to the Phoenicians, 'who may be called "the English of the Old World"', because they commanded the waters of the Mediterranean, attaining supremacy in shipbuilding and trading. As such, the first inhabitants of Malta were a 'race of Caucasian origin', markedly different in appearance and culture from the Arabs. 'No close observer could confuse the two races', he concluded (Strickland, 1950).

Second, responding to 'criminality' in Malta seldom if ever figured into British priorities. Colonial officials expended their energy on a fairly narrow set of objectives (related to political, military, and commercial interests), and when it came to many issues affecting Maltese, they displayed considerable indifference. Martin expressed the British view when he observed: 'In the criminal court it does not appear that there is much business of a serious nature. The common offence is stealing and pilfering; but there is a remarkable absence of all crimes of a very aggravated nature' (Martin, 1837: 274).

Theft was a problem, but it was seen as a response to poverty, not as a character flaw. Austin and Lewis prefaced their proposals concerning the police with an abstract on the state of the poor. They described a system of tenant farming, with conditions worsening each year, and as a consequence, a rise in the frequency of thefts—of growing crops, wood, agricultural tools, and domestic animals. The police, most of whom were deployed in Valletta and assigned to duties unrelated to crime prevention, could offer little protection. The situation compelled farmers to incur the expense of watchmen, but this system proved ineffective as they were overpowered by gangs of thieves. Anyone who dared to give evidence against the marauders faced revenge; wounded or dead animals, burnt bee-hives, rooted-up trees, and roofs being pulled-off (Austin and Lewis, 1839: 9–10).

The only other 'crime problem' of interest to the authorities was public begging. The sight of beggars, particularly in Valletta, invited comment periodically from British visitors and the police. William Makepeace Thackeray (1903: 266), who visited Malta in September 1844, described his reception in the Grand Harbour by 'little tubs in which some naked, tawny young beggars came paddling up to the steamer'. And, among the palaces, churches, court-houses, libraries, and 'London shops' of *Strada Reale*, 'professional beggars run shrieking after the stranger' (Thackeray, 1903: 267). The situation continued to attract attention into the 20th century. Tancred Curmi, appointed Superintendent of Police in 1903, complained of beggars in his annual report to the Chief Secretary to Government: 'A great number of street arabs, uncared for by their parents,

infest the streets, causing trouble to police, and nuisance to the public, almost with impunity' (*Police Annual Report*, 1905: 199).

Policing foreigners

The context in which fingerprint technology emerged in Malta more closely resembles England in the late Victorian era than India. As Sengoopta (2003: 54) explains, colonial administrators used fingerprints to establish the identity of persons in a wide range of activities, ranging from agricultural contracts to screening of employees. When the technology travelled to England, it became exclusively associated with criminal suspects. Fingerprints carried the stigma of criminal suspicion in the public mind and British sensibilities objected to any wider application of government surveillance. The only exception to this, as Sengoopta observes, occurred in the political furor leading up to passage of the Aliens Act in 1905, the first modern legislation to restrict immigration. Beginning in the 1880s, large numbers of Jews migrated to England, and journalists, MPs, and police officials expressed concern about 'alien criminality' (Knepper, 2007). Proposals for fingerprinting suspects did not jeopardize belief in British society as fair and free, it was argued, so long as the suspects were immigrants.

In Malta, the introduction of fingerprint technology was not a matter of British surveillance of the Maltese, but of British, and in some sense Maltese, surveillance over foreigners. The Knights took steps for protection of the island against contagious disease, implemented stringent quarantine regulations, and built the lazaretto on Manoel Island in Marsamxett Harbour. British governors assumed the management of the lazaretto and issued further quarantine regulations. During the 19th century, the first experience of passengers arriving from a suspected port was a period of nine to 14 days in detention in the lazaretto (Galea, 1966).⁶ British authorities also aimed to prevent foreign arrivals from becoming a 'burden' to their government and implemented a requirement for foreigners to make surety before they could stay. In 1827, the regulations allowed foreigners holding passports to disembark, provided they presented themselves to the police within 48 hours and made surety. To remain, foreigners were required to pay 'alien dues' four times a year and register for a *licenza di permanenza* (Hankey, 1827).

The British Crown was also sensitive about foreigners arriving in Malta who brought with them political ideals contrary to British rule. The *Risorgimento* produced a stream of Italians seeking sanctuary in Malta during the mid-19th century. Historic ties with Sicily, and affinities with Italian culture, led Maltese nobility to regard exiles arriving with sympathy. In 1837, Lord Glenelg, the Secretary of State for the Colonies, urged Governor Henry Bouverie not to allow discontent in Sicily and the Italian peninsula to spill over into Malta. 'I recommend,' Glenelg (1837) wrote, 'that you exercise the strictest vigilance in watching the proceedings of all aliens

residing in Malta.' He advised Bouverie not to turn away 'victims of unmerited misfortune', but not to allow Malta to 'become the resort of foreigners whose designs should be to incite insurrection'. His despatch further advised the governor not to allow foreigners to settle, unless they provided surety, and to submit monthly registers of all foreigners allowed to reside in Malta. The arrival of ships in the Grand Harbour full of Italian exiles became a crisis for Governor O'Ferrall in 1849. In a confidential despatch to Earl Grey, he explained that allowing persons 'imbued with strong opinions on the theory of government and the rights of the people' to reside in Malta 'would not be conducive to the contentment of the Maltese' (O'Ferrall, 1849).

The Malta police were involved in the surveillance of international fugitives. During the first decade of the 20th century, the districts received regularly circulars from the main station in Valletta containing descriptions of wanted persons. In 1907, for example, police in the districts were asked to look for a J. Edward Boeck, wanted by the New York City Police on a charge of grand larceny. The circular contains a verbal description of age, height, hair colour, and so on (Police circular, 1907a). A number of these announcements indicated that a photograph of the suspect could be viewed. The description of Ross W. Douglass, a clerk with the US Signal Corps in the Philippine Islands, was distributed in 1908. The announcement also includes information that 'A photograph of Douglass with a more detailed description of him and a photograph and description of the woman with whom he practised are with the Inspector On Duty, Main Station, Valletta' (Police circular, 1907b).

It was, however, the concern with Malta's 'own' foreigners that brought about a division within the police for monitoring suspicious outsiders. In 1899, the Aliens Law clarified and imposed procedures for reception of foreigners. Masters of ships were required to present a list of passengers (names, professions, place of embarkation) to the Collector of Customs. Police had the authority to require foreigners to present a passport at the Collector of Customs or Superintendent of Police and make declarations, including name and surname; rank, profession, or trade; and national origin. Those seeking to establish residence in Malta were entered into the 'Register of Resident Aliens' kept by the police. Foreign residents also had to provide, within two days of arrival, surety against becoming a burden to the Government. British subjects, and those placing a deposit of £10, could serve as guarantors. The law provided that foreign residents could be deported for conviction of crime or 'leading an idle and vagrant life' (*Government Gazette*, 1899). Responsibility for enforcing the Aliens Law fell to the police. During the first five years, hundreds of prosecutions were carried out each year, mostly for failing to provide surety. Few foreigners were prosecuted for crimes—some 23 between 1899 and 1904 (*Police Annual Report*, 1905: 323).

Many foreigners came to Malta during the 'boom' years of 1903–6, attracted by employment on civil engineering projects. Construction of the

breakwater in the Grand Harbour by the Admiralty and barracks by the War Office led to a doubling of wages; every available Maltese was drawn into the work and contractors imported labourers from Italy and Spain. In his annual report for 1904–5, Tancred Curmi described ‘a considerable increase in alien immigration’ with more than 200 deported. ‘Undesirable aliens continue to give trouble, and their misdeeds are only kept in check with difficulty’. This situation continued. Curmi reported in 1905–6: ‘The enforcement of the Aliens Law is a source of much difficulty to the Police’ (*Police Annual Report*, 1907: I10). But by 1908, Curmi reported that ‘works yielding lucrative employment to thousands of skilled and unskilled hands’ had been completed, and he welcomed a decrease in the influx of ‘undesirable aliens, and alien immigration generally’ (*Police Annual Report*, 1908: I12).

The influx of foreigners led to formation of the Aliens Branch and Criminal Record Office. In the report for 1907–8, Curmi notes that several alterations had been made to the Aliens Branch and Criminal Record Office. He hoped these improvements would allow for better monitoring of alien immigration and sought to produce a census of alien residents in Malta; the population was estimated to be under 3000 (*Police Annual Report*, 1908: I9). Curmi was also pleased to report a decrease in crime, during a period of ‘general lack of work’, which he attributed to the Criminal Investigation Branch. Curmi continued to add staff and make changes in their organization. The work of criminal investigation had, he said, led to the arrest and conviction of ‘several dangerous characters known to be ringleaders of the criminal class’. Curmi also pointed to another weapon in the fight against crime: house numbers. New building, and neglect by property owners, meant a rise in the number of places without addresses. The police took active steps to compel owners to paint house numbers above doors and carried out re-numbering in certain housing areas (*Police Annual Report*, 1908: I9).

And then there was the problem of ‘artistes’. During the 1920s and 1930s, as many as 50 foreign women listing their trade as ‘artiste’ resided in Malta; they worked in music halls and cabarets catering to Navy personnel. Valletta, Floriana and Sliema had numerous music halls, the Flag Ship, Empire, and John Bull among others, featuring ‘The Montana Sisters’, ‘Miss Topsy’, and other acts. The largest percentages arrived from Italy and France, although significant numbers came from eastern Europe. In 1928, for example, there were 13 women specifying their trade as ‘artistes’ from Italy, one from Russia, 14 from Germany, 12 from France, nine from Hungary, four from Austria, and one or two from Romania, Belgium, Russia, Chile, and Czechoslovakia (*Police Annual Report*, 1928: H11). The police devoted a number of detectives to surveillance of music halls according to the theory that they provided cover for ‘clandestine prostitution’. Authorities chose to dwell on the character of the immigrant women and refused to acknowledge the role of the British Empire in bringing about conditions in which this character was lost (Levine, 2004).

Origins of the Detective Branch

Fingerprint technology became institutionalized when the concern with foreigners became subject to modern methods of criminal identification and the Malta police formed the Detective Branch. Curiously, when the Detective Branch took up fingerprint technology, no reference was made to Scotland Yard or British policing. Rather, the rationale was stated in reference to Italy, Britain's rival for Maltese loyalties.

The initial idea for a detective branch appears in the report of the police commission in 1904. The commission, chaired by Sir Edward M. Merewether, held a series of meetings on the organization of the police, and in January 1903, the commissioners heard from Tancred Curmi, who was then Senior Assistant Superintendent of Police. Curmi mentioned that although the perpetrators of crimes in the villages were known, the people were reluctant to inform the police for fear of retribution. Curmi explained that people were unsure 'their names will not be mentioned', which is why he insisted on establishing a 'proper criminal investigation department under the control of the director' (Merewether, 1904: vi). But Curmi's suggestion was not taken up because the commissioners decided it would be too difficult to find 'properly qualified men' and that, if they could be found, such men would find it impossible to 'conceal their identity in a small place like Malta' (Merewether, 1904: 15).

In 1909, the Secretary of State for the Colonies sent Colonel Edward B. McNinnis to review the state of policing in Malta. He prepared an extensive report dealing with a catalogue of issues, including a detective branch, criminal records, and fingerprints. McNinnis recommended that a detective force be organized with men of 'special aptitude', 'superior education', and fluency in English, Maltese, and Italian. Records of criminals and thieves should be kept in the detective office, accessible to each member of the branch. 'It is most essential that one or more members of the Detective Branch should be trained as experts in the taking and classification of "finger prints"', McNinnis wrote, 'as this method of identification is absolutely infallible' (McNinnis, 1910: 6). He added that the making of photographs and copying of tattoo marks from prisoners' bodies was also of assistance as a means of identification. McNinnis also recommended the Aliens Branch should be amalgamated within a detective branch, and placed under the oversight of the divisional superintendent at Valletta. The superintendent should have the care of the 'alien, habitual and general criminal registers', the 'photography of criminals', and 'take impressions of fingerprints of all criminals and shall be responsible that they are properly indexed and registered' (1910: 11).⁷ Virtually none of McNinnis's recommendations were carried out owing to the anticipated expense. In 1913, John E. Clauson and A.E. Stephenson were appointed to enquire into government expenditures and considered the report of Colonel McNinnis. 'We are prepared to admit that, possibly, according to the highest standards of police organisation, some improvements in the Malta police force may be desirable, but ...' the report

concluded, ‘we have considerable hesitation in supporting recommendations which, in the long run, would apparently involve additional cost’ (*Government Gazette*, 1913: ix).

Claude W. Duncan, who became Superintendent of Police in 1916, revived the argument for a detective force in his audit of police organization. ‘The lack of any organised Detective Force is, I think, keenly felt at this time, and I regret to say no such organised force exists in Malta’, he wrote (Duncan, 1917: 4). He addressed the objection to Curmi, that it would be impossible for detectives to conceal their identity, by explaining the difference between the role of detectives and secret service. A detective force, or criminal investigation department, did not rely on gathering information by means of secret agents. There was, in fact, no categorical difference between detectives and general police, except that detectives focused on ‘detection of crime’ and ‘special surveillance of the criminal classes’ (Duncan, 1917: 4). The existing Special and Aliens Branch, he proposed, would be incorporated into the Detective Force, along with the Criminal Record Branch. Clearly, Duncan wanted to see a criminal investigation department in Malta modelled after Scotland Yard. Among a number of other recommendations, he suggested the need to change the titles of senior officers to bring the Malta police more in line with other colonial police forces.

The Detective Branch was not founded until 1919, after Duncan had left (he was appointed Inspector General of Police for Southern Nigeria), and Colonel Henry Bamford became Commissioner. Bamford stated in his annual report of 1919–20 that the Detective Branch carried out criminal investigation work and maintained criminal records, aliens, and passports. He also noted that ‘considerable work has occurred through retention of passports for British subjects’ (*Police Annual Report*, 1921: H3). During the following year, the Detective Branch was under the charge of Joseph Semini, who later became a Superintendent of Police. Bamford praised Semini for ‘exceptionally good work’ in detection of currency forgeries and sites for production of unlicensed liquor. The report noted that:

the keeping of criminal records includes the production of the past history of every person brought before the courts, of every emigrant or other person requiring a certificate of conduct, and innumerable cases of enquiry into the character of persons for various reasons.

(*Police Annual Report*, 1922: I4)

Semini, who demonstrated some expertise in forensic science, was likely the single most important person behind the introduction of fingerprint-based criminal identification. Details of his life are difficult to obtain, but he was born in Valletta, and judging from the surname, he was the son of Italians who had emigrated from the region of Venice.⁸ At the time of the *Sette Giugno* in 1919, he was an inspector of police and seems to have impressed the commissioners. The minutes record that he retrieved from the Central Hospital in Floriana, splinters of a bullet that had been mentioned by another witness as being a ‘dum dum’ bullet. Developed at the Cartridge

and Percussion Cap Factory at Dum-Dum (outside Calcutta) for the British Army, the 'mushrooming' bullet had a soft, lead point to expand on impact and increase the diameter of wounds. The Hague Convention (1899) outlawed use of such ammunition in international warfare, and had British forces used this against civilians in Malta, it would have meant considerable embarrassment. After an examination, the commissioners concluded the splinters did not form such a bullet (Parnis et al., 1919b: 26).

Semini also took a keen interest in criminology. In a series of articles appearing in *Melita*, a local literary review, he discussed the need to bring about 'drastic reforms' in criminal records. The police should make use of photography in criminal and history sheets for delinquents. He was particularly concerned with 'juvenile hawkers', boys from poor families sent into the streets to sell sweets, and because they did not possess a licence, were brought to court, and given a short term of imprisonment. To support his argument for the introduction of fingerprint technology, Semini referred to some 'points of criminology' drawn from the Italian school of criminal anthropology. 'Many of our congenital defects are transmitted to us by our parents', Semini (1925a: 247) wrote; 'these are either cured or developed into a state of degeneracy by the environment we are unconsciously cast into or by the way we are brought up in childhood.' He goes on to write that 'modern criminologists classify delinquents under five categories: insane delinquents, born delinquents and incorrigibles, habitual delinquents, occasional delinquents, and delinquents by passion' (Semini, 1925b: 306). Semini knew Italian, and he may have read Lombroso (Gibson, 2002).⁹ He may also have learned of Lombroso from Giuseppe Hyzler, the chair of forensic medicine at the University of Malta, who had studied at the University of Rome. In any event, Semini's work engaged the conceptual language of Italian criminology during the inter-war period. He argued that it was important to introduce 'the finger print method with habitual and confirmed criminals', along with a criminal museum 'set up on practical and scientific lines' (Semini, 1925a: 247).¹⁰

By 1932, fingerprint technology became routine in Malta. In the annual report for 1930–1, Salvatore Galea, Commissioner of Police, explained that the Detective Branch had been placed in charge of a superintendent; this branch 'is being reorganised and a system of fingerprints is being introduced' (*Police Annual Report*, 1932: A3). The following year, Galea said the Criminal Investigation Department had been 'thoroughly reorganised. During the year, 670 persons were fingerprinted and 351 were photographed.' He added that 'finger-print impressions have already been produced as evidence in court' (*Police Annual Report*, 1933: R3). Fingerprints became a regular part of subsequent annual reports. The following year, 697 persons were fingerprinted and 649 photographed (*Police Annual Report*, 1934: Q3) and the year after that, it became routine to fingerprint and photograph: '493 persons were fingerprinted and 493 were photographed' (*Police Annual Report*, 1935: Q3). By 1935, fingerprints had become seen as an important aspect of investigation. A circular of 22 January 1935 from the head office instructed divisions that 'great care is to be taken to preserve

fingerprints or other materials connected with the crime as these may provide very important and positive evidence' (Police circular, 1935).

The superintendent in charge of the Criminal Investigation Department, beginning in 1931 was Joseph Axisa. He received the King's Police Medal from King George V, quite possibly in recognition for his efforts related to the Criminal Investigation Department (*Police Annual Report*, 1933: R3). The King's Police medal had been instituted by Edward VII in 1909 for gallantry in line of duty, for preventing crime, or for a distinguished record in administrative or detective service. Axisa became in 1933 a Deputy Commissioner of Police with authority for the CID. In this role, Axisa had charge of the alien register and authority to investigate cases involving foreigners. A circular from 1934 instructs constables to inform 'DC Axisa' of all cases in which foreigners were involved (Police circular, 1934).

Conclusions

It required more than three decades for fingerprint technology, invented in the British colony of India, to reach the British colony of Malta. Fingerprint classification did not arrive in Malta until 1932 because Malta presented a different context; the social conditions conducive for the use of this knowledge did not exist. In Malta, there was nothing comparable to the effort to distinguish ordinary crimes from those of dacoits and thuggee as in the Criminal Tribes Act. The extension of a criminal code mindful of the rights of British subjects, a police force organized to keep order rather than prevent crimes, the Europeaness of the Maltese people, and the lack of a serious crime problem introduced considerable 'delay' in the use of fingerprint-based criminal identification.

The introduction of fingerprint technology raises interesting questions about the diffusion of knowledge in the British Empire. The context in Malta surrounding the use of fingerprints was more similar to England than India, to metropole than periphery. Some members of the British political class were willing to extend methods otherwise reserved for criminal suspects to immigrants. Similarly, the effort to identify and monitor aliens in Malta created the institutional basis within the police organization from which fingerprint science would be practised. Curiously, when fingerprint techniques were put in place, the Malta police did so without reference to Scotland Yard or British policing. British consultants advised the Malta police to implement fingerprint classification more than once, but when the Malta police did adopt fingerprint science, the police official responsible seemed to have had more interest in Italian criminology. The diffusion of knowledge within the British Empire did not operate in a predictable direction. Rather, knowledge arising in one colony spread to others, as well as to England, channelled by familiar prejudices as much as scientific discovery.

What we can say about Sengoopta's (2003) argument, from our review of Malta's history, is that he is largely right about fingerprints as a social

technology. In Malta and India in the early 20th century, fingerprint classification conflated suspect individuals with suspect populations. British officials, many of whom saw the Maltese as European, felt they possessed sufficient understanding of Maltese society. Criminality never really became a priority; what 'criminal class' existed was left to Malta's police to sort out. The interest in criminal identification coincided with concern about 'otherness', foreigners who came to work on the breakwater and dance in the music halls.

Notes

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- 1 The eighth individual to hold the chair of forensic medicine at the University of Malta, Dr Joseph Louis Grech (1927–99), founded the Institute of Forensic Studies in 1993. We would like to take this opportunity to dedicate this research to his memory.
- 2 Nevertheless, appointment of Maltese to the police force remained a political issue for some time. Reflecting on the reforms prompted by the Austin and Lewis report, *Il Mediterraneo*, a newspaper edited by Italian exiles in Malta, insisted the head of police should not be 'an Englishman from the mother country' because this would be 'an act of great injustice towards the natives' (*Il Mediterraneo*, 1841: 7). In 1879, Sir Penrose Julyan, appointed to report of the administration of government in Malta, complained that two-thirds of the police could not write their own names, more were ignorant of English, and many could speak nothing but Maltese (Julyan, 1879: 21). The committee to review police organization led by Gerald Strickland several years later voiced a similar concern. Candidates for the police force were not only illiterate but came from 'the lowest grade of the working class'. The committee suggested that those who could read and write, or who could speak English, and men with small families should be preferred (King et al., 1899: 3).
- 3 British rule did, however, lead to considerable trouble among the Maltese. During the 1920s and 1930s, Britain sought to stave off Italian influence, leading to intense and angry politics. Gerald Strickland, the dominant political personality of the period, led a mob of some 500 zealots around Valletta as part of his campaign for Anglicization. They insulted prominent Italian residents and vandalized Italian institutions. He became Prime Minister in 1927, and before 1930, there were three plots, and one attempt, to assassinate him. During the 1970s and 1980s, Maltese society became extremely polarized and extremists from the Labour and Nationalist parties clashed. The Labour party won the general elections and Dom Mintoff became Prime Minister. Mintoff leaned towards Soviet-style socialism; he presided over an era of disorder, violence, crime, and

- torture. A more extensive discussion of police organization in Malta can be found in Azzopardi Cauchi (2004).
- 4 At the same time, Lewis saw in the Maltese character a ‘practical talent’ on par with the English, and a ‘manner and deportment’, not only agreeable, but superior to some English—the vulgar English wives of naval men’ (Lewis, 1870: 71).
 - 5 Archibald Garrod (1919: 10) makes a similar argument, insisting that the language of island peoples provides the means to trace ancestry and ‘the Maltese tongue bears witness to a Semitic source.’
 - 6 John Howard visited Manoel Island during his tour of the lazarettos in Europe (1785).
 - 7 This superintendent would also have charge of supplies and equipment: 482 revolvers, 24 bicycles, 118 batons, 44 handcuffs, and 129 bulls-eye lanterns.
 - 8 This information is based on what can be gleaned from a passport application Semini made and thoughts from Laura Semini, University of Pisa.
 - 9 Lombroso’s work could be found in Malta at the time Semini wrote his articles. The National Library’s collection dates from 1555; the present building was completed in 1796. Although it is difficult to establish when a particular book was acquired, the library owns an 1896–7 edition of *L’Uomo Delinquente* (Torino).
 - 10 By the 1930s, the ‘constitutional school’ of criminology had emerged in Italy, led by Nicola Pende, Salvatore Ottolenghi, and Benigno Di Tullio. They sought to identify the psychological and physical aspects of the delinquent constitution that distinguished the actual criminal from the occasional lawbreaker (Knepper, 2008).

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