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9 Body Commodification? Class and Tattoos in Victorian Britain

JAMES BRADLEY

THE VALUE OF A TATTOO

In the Victorian world of commodities the Western tattoo was a strange object. Tattooing took place, more often than not, within the framework of a transaction of goods and services that involved the tattooed and the tattooer. The transaction was usually financial, although on convict hulks and in transports and prisons, it often involved the exchange of contraband goods. So far there is no difference between a tattoo and any other commodity – clothing or jewellery, for example. But what after the completion of the transaction? Unless perishable (food or drink bought for consumption), the vast majority of goods had a lasting, if depreciating, exchange value, hence the second-hand market in clothes. Tattoos were neither perishable, nor were they comparable with commodities that retained an exchange value. In nineteenth-century Britain there was no meaningful second-hand market in tattoos. This is not to say that the acquisition of a tattoo did not add value to the body. Where tattoos were used to create extraordinary bodies for display in side- or freak-shows, the process invested the body with a value it previously did not possess.[1] But the instances of tattoos creating wealth for anyone but the tattooer were sufficiently rare that the phenomenon of a commodity with no exchange value beyond the initial transaction demands further exploration.

Victorian tattooing is, in an oblique way, reminiscent of Clifford Geertz's interpretation of Balinese cock-fights as 'deep play'. He revised Bentham's concept of utilitarianism to explain the Balinese predilection for betting more than could 'reasonably' be afforded upon the outcome of such fights. Bentham regarded such behaviour as irrational. The pound that could be won was outweighed by the fortune that could be lost. For the community as a whole, the marginal utility of the combined stake was massively negative, and the outcome was net pain. By the logic of utilitarianism, deep play was

immoral and should be outlawed. Geertz, however, gave Bentham's concept a twist. Individuals and collectivities do participate in deep play, and not because of any essential irrationality.[2] At stake in cockfights were matters of status within the family group and the wider community. 'Irrational' gambling upon a contest between two birds had a goal beyond winning money: nothing less, indeed, than the production and reproduction of social order.

Victorian tattooing was like deep play. For the tattooed individual loss of money exceeded value added to the body. It was, from a Benthamite perspective, an irrational act. But the inhabitants of Bentham's world did get tattooed. This meant ignoring the threat of pain, the danger of infection, and the stigma that was occasionally integral to this ambivalently received practice. The tattooed individual acquired a mark that was almost certainly indelible, something that had to be lived with for the remainder of his or her days. Tattooing signified more than a financial transaction in the realm of commodities. For the tattooed individual, it was an act at once intimate, emotive and symbolically significant. It encoded irremediably, at the boundary between the body and the world, nothing less than social relations.

IDENTIFYING THE AFFLICTED: THE REPRESENTATION AND REALITY OF THE VICTORIAN TATTOO

The anthropologist Alfred Gell attempted to develop an epidemiology of tattooing for Polynesia. It is not overly apparent whether he deploys the term 'epidemiology' figuratively or literally. On the one hand, he suggests his usage is metaphorical. On the other, he states that tattooing 'does indeed have a pattern of occurrence, which resembles the uneven, but at the same time predictable, incidence of an illness'.[3] From the historian's perspective this second, more determinist, position is attractive. Would it, therefore, be possible to develop a predictive epidemiology of tattooing in the Victorian era? The simple answer is that we cannot meet the stringent requirements necessitated by this rigorously statistical methodology. Throughout much of the nineteenth century tattooing as a British custom was barely visible, and where it was – in scanty literary sources, criminal records, and medical literature – an accurate inference of its incidence within the wider population is impossible. If, however, the various representations of tattooing and the tattooed are examined, a coherent picture emerges of the groups most affected: criminals, members of the armed forces and certain segments of the upper classes.

By the end of the nineteenth century tattoos had increasingly become associated with criminals. This outcome was a function of the penal system's

machinery. In the first half of the century, detailed physical descriptions were integral to the observation and identification of individuals transported to the penal colonies. Thus on arrival in the Australia, for example, the tattoos of each convict were scrupulously recorded in Conduct Registers. These were then used to identify absconded prisoners.[4] Following the abolition of transportation in the 1850s, British penal and policing systems continued to rely upon similar methods of identification. During the 1860s, when the 'problem' of the habitual criminal was first delineated, tattoo descriptions were an important component of individuating recidivists: the Habitual Criminals Act (1869) established the *Register of Distinctive Marks* which provided detailed listings of the tattoos of previously convicted criminals. As late as the 1890s, many years after the introduction of photography, senior policemen remained firm in the conviction that tattoo descriptions were an invaluable weapon against the repeat offender.[5]

The longstanding presence of tattoo descriptions in criminal records did not create the simple equation 'tattoo equals criminal'. Indeed, until the 1890s, and then only in a piecemeal way, tattoos were neither regarded as membership cards for the company of thieves, nor as symptoms of the criminal body riddled by the hereditary disease of crime. Henry Mayhew, for example, chief architect of the criminal class and besotted with the idea that criminals shared a culture distinct from that of the well-behaved masses, refused to make the connection between criminals and tattoos, despite an open invitation to do so. Following a visit to Millbank Penitentiary, he recounted the words of a warder who noted that 'many of the regular thieves have five dots between their thumb and forefinger, as a sign that they belong to "the forty thieves"', adding that tattoos were more commonly found upon criminals than upon their law-abiding counterparts.[6] Mayhew's curiosity remained blunted and he failed to elaborate the matter. Later observers of the same phenomenon were less circumspect. They too, however, resisted the urge to criminalize the practice, preferring to adopt a comparative approach which sought to identify the environmental conditions shared by the different populations purportedly affected by endemic tattooing – criminals, sailors, soldiers and, at the end of the century, men and women of fashion. It was generally agreed that confinement, boredom and emulation, experienced singularly or jointly, were the necessary pre-conditions for the practice.[7]

Caplan has demonstrated that, whereas on the Continent Lombrosian criminal anthropology led to a partial and uneven pathologization of criminal tattoos, in Britain environmental explanations predominated.[8] This was partly a function of a separate British intellectual dynamic that 'between

the 1860s and World War I generated [its] own biologized concepts of the "habitual criminal" and the "moral imbecile"'[9] – concepts developed without reference to tattoos. By the 1890s, however, Lombrosian criminology had made limited inroads into British social thought, impacting upon the discourse that informed the interpretation of criminal tattooing.[10] In the late-Victorian context an observer was, therefore, beset by tensions between hereditarian and environmental explanations of the practice, and between British and European criminological traditions.

Havelock Ellis's commentary upon tattooing in his early work *The Criminal* is illustrative of the hybrid, and frankly messy, ideas that flowed from the working-out of these tensions. Although 'sceptical of Lombroso's indiscriminate enthusiasm',[11] he was sufficiently influenced by the Italian to use *L'uomo delinquente* as a template for his own commentary on criminality. At the same time, his approach was marked by an ambivalence towards Lombroso's crude determinism, to the extent that 'his text recapitulated the ambivalences of English criminal science in both embracing and hesitating before the physical indications of criminality'.[12] Ellis knew that British criminals were tattooed, relying in particular on Greaves's research in Derby Prison which had revealed that of 555 persons admitted, 41 (including one woman) were tattooed, an incidence of around 7 per cent. Ellis reported that Greaves had found that those tattooed 'were chiefly soldiers, with a few miners and sailors'.[13] The low rate of tattooing should have been enough to deflect Ellis from either criminalizing or pathologizing tattoos. His concluding remarks derived, however, from the combined wisdom of the adversaries Lombroso and Lacassagne, resulting in an uncomfortable conflation of biological and environmental explanations. He allowed that '[i]dleness often explains it among prisoners, shepherds and sailors'.[14] But he also felt that pathological 'vengeance' produced criminal tattooing. Ellis's account, therefore, separated the 'pathological' tattoos of the hereditary criminal, and the 'normal' environmental tattoos of the rest – a perfect example of the English intellectual tradition of finding the 'middle' or 'third' way.

The low incidence of tattooing in Greaves's 'sample' hardly proved that tattoos were either common among the criminal population or a defining mark of the individual criminal. Rather it reinforced extant weak occupational correlations. Perhaps an analysis of inmates untattooed at admission but tattooed on release would have revealed that the practice was embedded in prison culture. Was it possible, however, that what Greaves was really observing was the extent to which tattooing was endemic within popular culture itself? Might we be able to infer the scope of tattooing among the

working classes, urban or agricultural, from its occurrence in the convicted population? The physical descriptions forming a part of the aforementioned Australian Conduct Registers provide some clues. Prior to the late 1840s, these gave a detailed picture of each convict's body – the location of injuries, deformities, physical and mental abnormalities, scars, marks and tattoos. Bradley and Maxwell-Stewart have demonstrated that 308 from 1,179 (26 per cent) Scottish male convicts transported to Van Diemen's Land between 1840 and 1853 were tattooed.[15] These figures do not, however, allow the extrapolation of an overall incidence of tattooing among working-class males in mid-century Scotland. And the same conclusion would hold fast should a similar methodological exercise be carried out upon transportees convicted elsewhere within the British Isles. For while Nicholas *et al.* have argued persuasively that the transportees were not part of a criminal residuum, but were drawn representatively from the British working class,[16] we are probably witness to nothing other than the impact of transportation itself upon the convict body. The operation of the system provided conditions rife for endemic tattooing that disappeared with the introduction of the panopticized penitentiary: long hours unsupervised in shared close confinement; the collective trauma of mass exile; the proximity to seafaring culture; and the necessary admixture of court-martialled soldiers with members of the civilian population.[17]

If tattooing was widely practised among the urban working class, it remained cloaked in invisibility throughout the period. No commentator emerged to document its occurrence. While invisibility does not imply non-existence, the one professional – the medical practitioner – whose gaze fell frequently upon the skin of working-class bodies, dead or alive, did not observe tattoos with a regularity that required utterance: at least, this is so in accounts of tattooing contained in medical jurisprudence textbooks. It was only following the Tichborne trials of the 1870s that tattoos featured in such tomes at all. The byzantine trials sparked by the claimant Orton drew the attention of medical jurists towards tattoos as a means for establishing personal identity. Pre-Tichborne, there had been little point in commenting upon what had no obvious legal use. Even so, post-Tichborne tattoos were of interest only in so far as they provided a possible avenue for establishing the identity of corpses and impostors and there were no attempts to correlate their existence with particular fragments of the general populace.[18]

Over the next twenty years a subtle change occurred. Medical jurists gradually identified tattooing with sailors, soldiers and (occasionally) criminals – but not the wider working class.[19] Glaister, a Glasgow surgeon and forensic medical expert, was specially qualified to comment upon this matter. By 1893

he estimated that as a police surgeon he had examined around 300 corpses,[20] and by the publication of his medical jurisprudence textbook in 1902 he had seen many more. His observations of the quick and the dead led him inductively to the conclusion that tattooing was 'mainly prevalent among soldiers, sailors, and a certain class of civilians associated with both classes'.[21] Either the widely held commonsense knowledge of tattooing's sub-cultural *demi-monde* had somehow transmitted itself to his mind, adulterating his scientific faculties, or he had actually observed this pattern. The former should not be ruled out: scientists and medical practitioners have often shaped their explanations to fit *a priori* assumptions.[22] In the absence of concrete evidence, however, we must award him the benefit of the doubt. But his words need not be the sole testimony. The tattooist George Burchett, reminiscing about the docklands of East End London at the turn of century, described his clientele as consisting of 'sailors, dockers and other rough diamonds'.[23] Another London tattooist, David Purdy, writing towards the end of the nineteenth century, identified a similar pattern: 'I believe it to be a common thing among soldiers and sailors.'[24]

The association of tattooing with sailors is a minor trope of Victorian literature. Sherlock Holmes's powers were proved to Watson's satisfaction when the former identified correctly, and with no prior knowledge, a retired sergeant of Marines. The sceptical Watson was astounded, but Holmes explained '[e]ven across the street I could see a great blue anchor tattooed on the back of the fellow's hand. That smacked of the sea.'[25] Throughout the nineteenth century tattoos were most associated with sailors. In popular literature, where tattoos appeared, they usually signified the seafarer. Rider Haggard's humorous novel *Mr Meeson's Will* has as the dynamo of its plot the tattooing of a will upon the lily-white back of a ship-wrecked maiden. The tattooer was, of course, a rough and drunken sailor.[26] His arms were covered 'with various tattoos: flags, ships, and what not'.[27] Another prime slice of late-Victorian pulp fiction recapitulates the association. Fergus Hume's *Tracked by a Tattoo*, a crude distillation of Wilkie Collins's best novels blended with slight echoes of the Tichborne case, presents the detective Fanks questioning an ex-servant, Mrs Prisom, about her dead master:

> 'Sir Francis was a Sailor? I suppose when he went to sea and came home a middy, he had anchors, and ships, and true lovers' knots, and such like things tattooed upon his skin.'
>
> 'He just had,' replied Mrs Prisom laughing. 'He had quite a fancy for that sort of thing. He told me he learnt how to do it in Japan, and very clever he was at drawing such pictures on the skin.'[28]

If the comments of interested parties were accurate, tattooing was an endemic feature of life on the ocean wave. Thus, the *Lancet* noted in 1851 'the voluntary tattooing of seamen'.[29] The Duke of Cambridge, during a parliamentary commission on military discipline (1868–69), compared the 'branding' (tattooing) of army deserters and bad characters with 'the marking most sailors do to themselves as a matter of amusement'.[30] The matter was also discussed in both houses of parliament. Mr Guest, defending 'branding', reiterated the common defence that '[i]n reality, it implied nothing more than the tattooing to which nearly all sailors voluntarily submitted', a point emphasized by Viscount Bury – '[a]lmost every sailor in Her Majesty's fleet bore similar marks'.[31]

The connection between tattoos and the sea was not chimerical. Many are those who have described the practice's importation from Polynesia following Cook's 1770 voyage to the South Seas.[32] The American historian Ira Dye, however, believes that it must have predated the early 1770s, arguing that by the end of the century tattooing was so prevalent throughout the American merchant and naval fleets that its introduction a mere twenty years earlier was an impossibility.[33] Nevertheless, both versions pinpoint seafaring culture as the cradle of the modern Western tattoo. Burchett's memoirs indicate that a century later shipboard tattooing remained ingrained in the fabric of British naval culture.[34] He noted, however, that by then it had become acceptable for officers, like the fictional Sir Francis, to undergo the operation, quoting a complaint by Commander C.W. Cole that there was, in 1883, 'a prominent and perennial mania of tattooing and almost all young officers of the squadron are bitten by the mania'.[35] The experience of Prince Albert Victor and Prince George of Wales corroborates Cole. During their visit to Japan they observed that many of the local Japanese tattooers came on board their ship the *Bacchante*, 'where they took up their quarters for two or three days, and had their hands full with tattooing different officers and men'.[36] Tattooing had transcended rank, becoming part-and-parcel of the general shipboard experience.

Unlike sailors, nineteenth-century literary sources fail to portray soldiers as tattooed. But other evidence suggests that it was as common among the land forces as it was in the navy. Indeed, the records examined by Bradley and Maxwell-Stewart reveal that the incidence of tattooing was significantly higher for soldiers than non-soldiers (48 per cent compared to 32 per cent). Tattooists like Sutherland Macdonald and Burchett believed that many of their customers were army men and Macdonald himself learnt his craft while serving in the Engineers.[37] As with the navy, tattooing was initially connected with the lower ranks (although Roger Tichborne sported a tattoo

while in the 6th Dragoon Guards during the 1850s, this was a relic of his schoolboy days),[38] before spreading to the officer class.

The scope and dimensions of army tattooing are most visible in medical reports. It was first identified as a medical problem after Lister's 'discovery' indicated that sepsis might follow unhygienic practices.[39] In 1862 the French naval surgeon Berchon announced that tattooing, 'generally supposed to be unattended with danger', might cause death. As a consequence the French naval authorities attempted to discourage the practice among its crews.[40] It was not until the 1880s, however, that physicians identified a risk that syphilitic infection might result from contact with an infected tattooist's needles, and it was officers of the Royal Army Medical Corps who reported the majority of incidents. Initially, a single case was recounted, but news of 'mass' infections soon came to light.[41] Most notable was an outbreak in 1888 at the Portsea barracks, Hampshire, involving twelve infected soldiers, all from the ranks of the same regiment. Barker, an Army Surgeon, conjectured that the source was a single tattooer.[42] A few months later, H. R. Whitehead communicated a similar event, showing that Portsea was not an isolated event.[43]

Due to the detail with which Barker described the incident, we are afforded an insight into the economy of tattooing among the lower ranks. Recalling the demi-metaphor of epidemiology, we see the quasi-dermatological illness of the tattoo spreading plague-like through a segment of the regiment, followed swiftly by the real disease of syphilis, which asserted its ascendancy by transposing its own mark upon the crudely etched tattoo patterns. The culprit was assumed to be a discharged soldier, granted the ethical anonymity of the initial 'S'. He was a hawker about the barracks, with a set repertoire of tattoos: 'twenty patterns on paper, mostly female figures, printed in copying ink, each pattern being able to be used about six times'. He applied the tattoo by wetting 'the pattern with saliva before applying it, to obtain an impression'. Barker believed the medium of infection was his saliva, not from the application of the patterns, but rather through his habit of cleaning the needles and mixing the ink with spittle from his syphilitically ulcerated mouth.

In all 23 soldiers were known to have visited 'S'. Nine failed to show symptoms. Of these, Barker believed at least four had previously been infected with syphilis and were therefore 'inoculated' against the disease and 'unlikely' to show the symptoms again. A further two had deserted but had, according to their comrades, developed sores prior to desertion. The dates on which the 23 were tattooed, and the distribution of infected to non-infected, is revealing (Table 1).

TABLE 1 Distribution of infected and non-infected soldiers in the Portsea outbreak (1888)

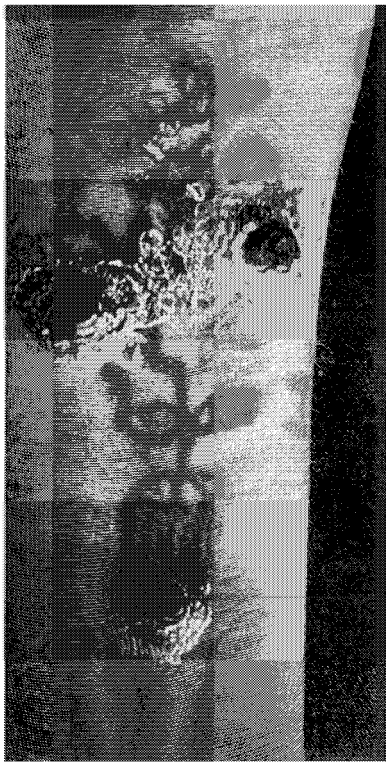
DATE	INFECTED	NOT INFECTED	TOTAL
18 May	2	0	2
1 June	1	0	1
15 June	2	1*	3
29 June	2	0	2
1 July	1	0	1
23 July	0	1	1
1 August	0	2	2
5 August	3	1*	4
6 August	0	4	4
11 August	1	0	1
23 August	0	2	2
TOTAL	12	11	23

* deserted before examination and counted as cases where syphilis was not contracted, but indications existed that they developed sores post-tattooing. Source: *BMJ*, 1 (1889).

Only four were tattooed on a day when 'S' failed to operate on another member of the regiment. A large imaginative leap is not required to visualize the men attending 'S' together in mutually supportive groups of two or more. For tattooing in this context was an experience to be shared among barrack-mates. When observers pinpointed emulation as a motive for tattooing they were envisioning the snowball effect apparent at Portsea. Thus it could spread rapidly through a regiment, affecting large numbers in a short time. All members of the ranks were threatened and a prior lack of tattoos made the individual more susceptible: of the infected twelve, only four had been previously tattooed.

Barker commented that over the three-month period '[m]en in the same regiment [were] tattooed, but not by S., [and] did not contract the disease',[44] implying that over this period a figure far in excess of 23 soldiers from the same regiment had been tattooed. On the basis of a full complement of *c.* 750 troops, and assuming a corps of officers, the incidence of tattooing among the ranks over a relatively short time amounted to a figure in excess of 5 per cent. If we assume, in line with Barker's testimony, that many of the soldiers were previously untattooed, this figure represents an approximation of the quarterly growth rate in tattoos, rather than the overall rate.

Just as medical practitioners were revealing the putative dangers of tattooing, it was diffusing, as if by metastasis, to the officer class. The pattern of



Syphilis erupting on the arm of a soldier over a recently tattooed flower-pot, from *British Medical Journal* 1 (1889).

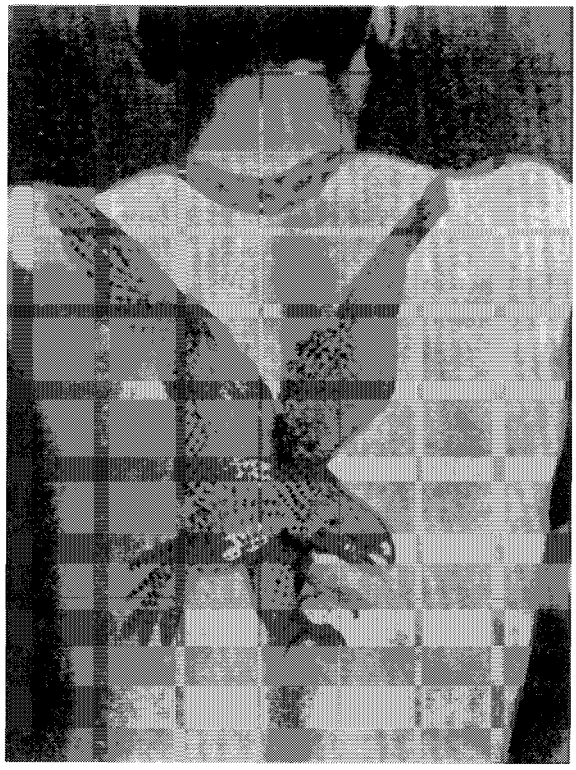
dispersion recalls that of the navy. The higher ranks had not 'caught' tattoos from crude barrack-room hawkers like 'S'. Rather, the most potent influences were a blend of imperial travel and peer pressure. Bolton insisted that 'many officers and men' stationed in Burma were tattooed by Burmese methods.[45] Lord 'Bobs' Roberts, for example, was said to have developed an enthusiasm for tattooing during service in Burma.[46] From that time, he encouraged the practice among his officers, asserting that the tattooing of regimental crests not only aided the identification of the dead on the battlefield (tragically realized for Roberts when his own son died in the Boer War with a regimental crest meticulously reproduced upon his arm by Macdonald),[47] but also encouraged a suitably martial *esprit de corps*.[48] Bolton, Burchett and Macdonald confirm that Roberts's words were heeded and, catalysed by the Boer War, tattoos became an ever more widespread affectation among officers.

Tattooing did not remain the preserve of soldiers, sailors and criminals. At some time around the late 1880s fashionable society was gripped by a tattoo

craze. By 1889 Macdonald's Jermyn Street studio had been inundated by wealthy Londoners. Macdonald himself, when questioned about the social composition of his clientele, replied '[m]ostly officers in the army, but civilians too. I have tattooed many noblemen, and also several ladies'.[49] Burchett identified the origins of the craze with the patronage of Edward, the Prince of Wales.[50] 'Bertie' had first been tattooed in the Holy Land, during his tour of 1862, although knowledge of this event did not emerge until 1881.[51] Apparently, he insisted that his sons be tattooed by *Hori* Chyo on their visit to Japan.[52] Later, returning to Europe via the Holy Land, the future George V wrote to his mother that he and his brother had been tattooed 'by the same old man that tatoed [sic] papa & the same thing too the 5 crosses'.[53] Whether royal patronage really provided the stimulus for fashionable acceptance is debatable.

From the mid-1890s, several journalists cast their eyes upon the phenomenon of the newly tattooed upper classes. One of these, Gambier Bolton, was typical of the new tattooed. The son of the Reverend James Jay Bolton, he was educated at 'private schools' and Cambridge, and married a daughter of Colonel Evelegh, C.B. He styled himself a 'public lecturer and writer on (popular) Natural History'. He travelled widely in Europe, North America and Asia, and accompanied the Duke of Newcastle on his tour round the world (1893–4). According to *Who Was Who* he wrote *A Book of Beasts and Birds* (1903) and *The Animals of the Bible* (1901).[54] His 'Pictures on the Human Skin', written for *Strand* magazine in 1897, revealed that, like army and naval officers, his own marked body was a function, in part, of his travels. Among other tattoos, he possessed a 'Sacred' dragon from Burma and a spider's web inscribed by Chyo. He collected tattooing artefacts and anecdotes from around the globe. But he was also a client of Macdonald, and the final illustrations in the article show the vivid outcome of this encounter. The mass of Bolton's back was covered with a finely detailed falcon, while around his shoulders was coiled an exquisite permanent necklace – a snake in green, red and black.[55]

If Bolton was the epitome of the tattooed gentleman, the public was given no shortage of other high-class role models to follow. Bolton's piece obliquely referred to princes and nobles but did not name names. R. J. Stephen's 'Tattooed Royalty', published a year later in *Harmsworth Magazine*, did. His informant was another London-based society tattooist, Ted Riley, '[than] whom no artist has tattooed more distinguished people', including the Grand Duke Alexis of Russia, Prince and Princess Waldemar of Denmark, Queen Olga of Greece, King Oscar II of Sweden, the Duke of York, Lady Randolph Churchill and the Duke of Newcastle.[56] Riley claimed to Stephen



Gambier Bolton's tattooed back and neck, from *Strand* magazine (1897).

that the list was far far longer. Significantly, Stephen's article was subtitled 'Queer Stories of a Queer Craze'. The iteration of 'queer' cannot escape notice. Stephen, or his editor, expected the magazine's readership to find the subject matter peculiar, in a 'look what the toffs are up to now' way. Indeed, the 'toffs' were presented by him as being almost as alien as exotically tattooed 'savages'.

BODY COMMODIFICATION: TATTOOS, CLASS AND CONTEXT

In the absence of hard evidence, the Otherness integral to Stephen's account signposts tattooing as a phenomenon way beyond the ken of the respectable middle classes. We must, therefore, conclude that it was limited, in the main, to the groups examined above. Consequently, on the most basic level, tattoos acted as a badge of social and cultural differentiation that separated the tattooed from the non-tattooed. On a deeper level, however, social and cultural homogeneity did not unite the tattooed, for the subject matter and

aesthetic style of the tattoos created a fault-line that divided the classes. Compare Purdy's description of tattooing with 'The Gentle Art of Tattooing' from the *Tatler* (1903). Purdy's world is a realm of sewing needles and wooden blocks:

> When pricking in, you must always prick the needle in straight. Place the points of your needles over the lines of the figure you have drawn on a person's arm then place your left arm round it, so as you have it in the palm of your left hand, then you can hold tight till further orders. When you have done this you can then commence pricking, but when you find the flesh is limp, you must leave off pricking till you can hold it firmer with your left hand; which you will be able to do after you have given your hand a rest.[57]

This laborious, almost militaristic, description reveals a world of manipulated flesh and drawn blood – one where the tattooer must always ensure that his needles are clean.[58] The arm is manipulated, held and pinched. The needle is pricked into flesh. The tattooed subject risks pain and infection. Purdy thus presented an insight into the informal practice that took place in the schoolyard, barrack-room and between the decks – a self-help manual for hawker's like 'S'.

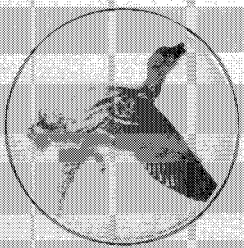
The *Tatler* related something different. Here tattooing was a 'gentle art', the height of fashionability, and the antithesis of Purdy's rough technique.[59] The sewing needle was replaced by an electric machine (invented by Samuel Reilly in New York in the 1870s) that tickled, not unpleasantly, the skin's surface. Thus described, the technique ignored the penetration of the outer skin that was essential to the operation, and pain was virtually eliminated. Burchett concurred. He used an anaesthetic and insisted that tattooing was 'practically painless, even agreeable'.[60] These factors made it not entirely unsuited for daring 'ladies' – the tattooist Alfred South, quoted in the *Tatler* article, said he had tattooed 900 out of a client-base of 15,000. For the beautiful people, of whatever gender, obtaining a tattoo was tantamount to buying a new frock. And unlike its rude counterpart, the operation took place in the comfortable environs of the 'studio', the place of artists and photographers.

Just as the two worlds affected bodies differently, so they created two separate aesthetic orders. Purdy's style was direct and simple: '[i]t would not be amiss to take the Tower Bridge, or the Imperial Institute. Or one of her Majesty's Battleships, and the Houses of Parliament'.[61] The 'gentle art',

OPPOSITE 'The Gentle Art of Tattooing: The Fashionable Craze of Today', with several examples of the new aesthetic style, from *The Tatler and Bystander* (1903).

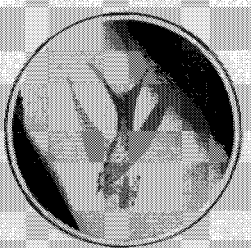
THE GENTLE ART OF TATTOOING

The Fashionable Craze of To-day.

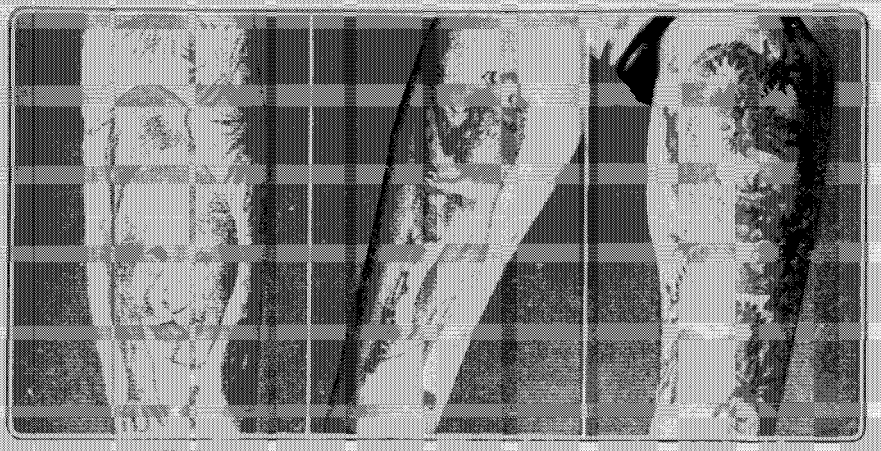


AFTER ARCHIBALD THORBURN
A design on a gentleman's wrist

The tattooing craze which first broke out in America has now come to this country, where its chief exponent is Mr. Alfred South of Cockspur Street. During his career Mr. South has operated on upwards of 15,000 persons, including about 900 English women, the designs in a great number of cases being of a most peculiar description. There are some instances where ladies have had the inscriptions on their wedding rings followed on their fingers beneath the ring. Ladies who like to keep pace with the times may be advised with illustrations of motor cars. Another device is that of a figure of Cupid disappearing into the depths of a pewter pot. This picture, which has been tattooed on the skin of one woman only, is entitled "Love gone to pot."



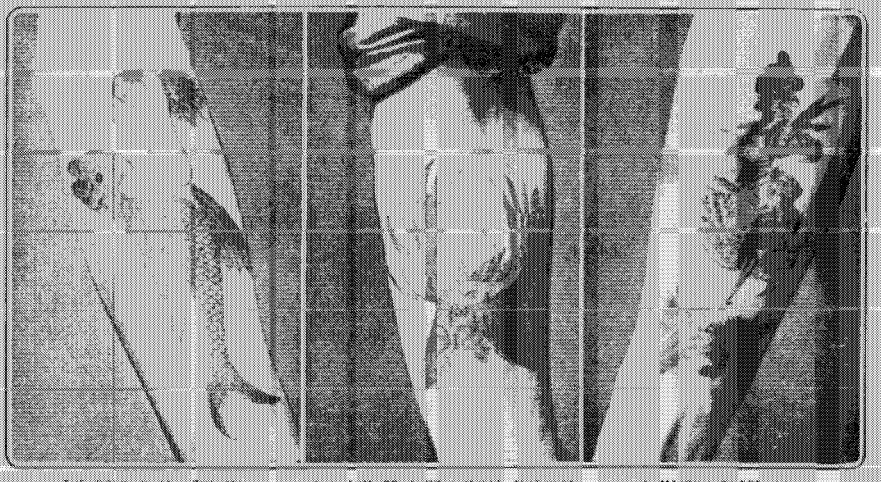
A MESSAGE OF PEACE
On the arm of a peeress



THE BLOOD TRAIL
After Nettleship's famous picture

LION ON THE PROWL
A design on the arm of a cavalry officer

THE CHINESE DRAGON
On the arm of a well-known general



THE DOLPHIN AND THE MOON

THE ARM OF A WELL-KNOWN NOTORIETY

A MAJOR'S SWORD ARM

however, created ornate and elaborate designs: analogues of oriental ornaments, for example, and occasionally, on a grander scale, reproductions of works of art.[62] We might almost be observing two unrelated practices producing two radically divergent meanings.

Working-class Jewellery

Purdy's literal designs were part of a long tradition revealed to the historian in criminal records. The convicts transported to Australia wore their tattoos either as identity tags or jewellery. Bradley and Maxwell-Stewart have demonstrated that the most common designs sported by Scottish convicts were either strings of initials or rings. Thus, over 115 convicts had their own initials inscribed upon their bodies. The contemporary view of the motive for this practice was fear of an anonymous death, particularly at sea.[63] Of these, however, 36 had their initials embedded in longer strings often punctuated by the heart, symbol of charity and love. Such tattoos contain deeper meanings than mere dog tags. One example will suffice to illustrate the point. James Milne bore the following inscription upon his arm: 'RMAWBMSM hearts & darts JM'.[64] 'JM' clearly represented Milne himself, while 'BM' and 'SM' were almost certainly members of his family. 'RMAW' is probably an acronym, that may plausibly be instantiated for the sentimental refrain 'Remember Always'.

In cases such as Milne, the tattoos represented a bond between the body of the individual and the object towards which the individual's emotions were expressed. This object might, of course, have been a church, nation, regiment or a ship, but, as with Milne, it most commonly involved other people. Here tattoos acted symbolically as emotional signifiers implying a strength of attachment and a token against absence. These signifiers produced in turn two different effects. In the first instance, the tattoo was a sometimes public, sometimes covert, display of connection, demonstrating through a blood sacrifice that a relationship penetrated beneath the skin – the body's boundary with the wider world. In the second instance, it was as if the tattooed individual was protecting him- or herself against separation: should separation occur the tattoo then acted as a vicarious physical presence for the absent other.

Another class of tattoo, by marking the moment of specific life-events, served similar functions. Symbols of celebration (pipes and bottles), mourning (figures by tombs), and even dates of trial and transportation were tattooed on some.[65] As with the other images, these were powerful devices of remembrance, not unlike the lockets, rings of hair, and household objects possessed by middle-class Victorians. The key to understanding lies in the

meaning of possessions. Mary Ann Brennan's oft-cited tattoo is relevant here.[66] When she was transported she had the following verse inscribed upon her arm:

> William Jesse
> When this you see remember me,
> And bear me in your mind,
> Let all the world say what they will,
> Speak of me as you find.[67]

The most striking feature of this verse is not its sentimentality, but that it was well known in nineteenth-century Britain. Maxwell-Stewart has located it, or variants of it, on a number of items manufactured through the length and breadth of Britain in the period 1760 to 1860.[68] These objects were intended as keepsakes: puzzle jugs custom-made for weddings and rolling pins intended as gifts from departing sailors to wives and lovers. It further transpires that the verse was inscribed upon convict love tokens, small coins reshaped as keepsakes.[69] Brennan, like many other working-class people, had few possessions. The most precious and most mobile possession was the body itself. Beyond small portable objects, mobility and poverty denied soldiers, sailors and prisoners the possibility of owning physical *memento mori*, 'the jewellery, watches and silverware' which were 'amongst the most mobile of all Victorian things'.[70] Tattoos provided a substitute for jewellery, or other material possessions: a means of articulating emotion to, and forging attachments between the body, the self and others.

Inconspicuous Consumption: The New Aesthetic Order

Some working-class tattoos were, in all probability, purely decorative. The straw-hatted man seated on a barrel drinking, and the tableau of sun, moon and seven stars fall into this category, although they are also open to other exegeses: the sun, moon and seven stars representing the pre-Darwinian cosmos with religious undertones, while in captivity the drinking man served as a reminder of less careworn days. Similarly, while the new aesthetic breed of tattoos appeared more explicitly decorous, they contained deep meanings that related to the client's capacity to consume. During the latter part of the nineteenth century the tattoo had become commodified, a package that could be bought from the set location of the tattooist's studio. The new tattoo was highly detailed, a fine act of draughtsmanship. And because the process of inscription was a time-consuming operation, it was costly (sometimes more than twenty guineas).

It was the entrepreneurial *nous* of the tattooist that made the new aesthetic

viable. Macdonald's tactics were exemplary. Apart from his artistic ability, he understood the need to create a suitable environment for his wealthy patrons. The West End location of the 'studio' – in reality the superintendent's office at the Jermyn Street Hammam – meant that his clients need not remove themselves from their social milieu. Indeed, the Hammam (annual ticket eight guineas, single session four shillings), provided a lush oriental backdrop to the Asian-associated art of aesthetic tattooing – the Turkish baths themselves, complete with a hairdresser, the services of a firm of chiropodists, and a café serving 'Oriental' dishes as well as Occidental refreshments, made it a haven of Eastern titillation.[71] Macdonald's studio provided all the comforts that could be expected from this setting:

> Luxurious cushions, resting here on a divan, the familiar needles with their gaily decorated handles and the little hypodermic syringe, not to mention the ever-ready box of cigarettes and the accompanying cooling drinks.[72]

Burchett could not compete with these ornate surroundings, but knew it would be as well to move his studio closer to the centre of London and the wealthier end of the market.[73]

The right social setting was not, however, enough. The tattooist had to present himself as a respectable man operating in hygienic surroundings. Macdonald's chief ploy was to insist that there were amateur tattooers who scratched patterns badly ('tattooers'), and skilled professionals ('tattooists').[74] Burchett was also acutely aware of the need to present a respectable front. Once he became a full-time tattooist, he portrayed himself as akin to a medical practitioner: adopting a white coat and emphasizing hygienic practices. This was not unpractical. As tattooing became increasingly represented by members of the medical profession as a medical problem, the outward display of hygiene was a necessity. But, medicalization was as symbolic as it was practical. Burchett evidently conceived himself as reproducing the style of doctor-patient epitomized in Harley Street practices. This required a certain deference which kept the patient-client in control of the transaction, in what has been termed 'bedside' medicine.[75]

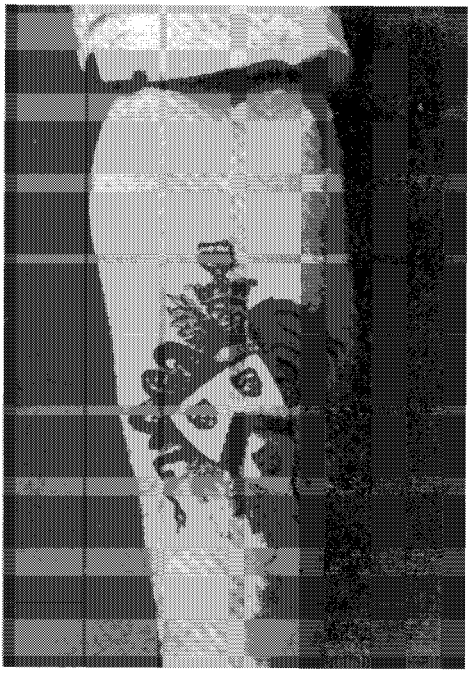
It was not, however, the professional tattooists who created the initial demand for the new tattoo. As we have seen, army and naval officers obtained their tattoos while serving overseas. In this sense, the newly commodified tattoo was the product of colonialism. Their 'ethnic' tattoos were on a par with those acquired as souvenirs by the businessmen and other globetrotters who visited Chyo's studio. As such, the tattoo obtained in the colonial realm was tantamount to the physical appropriation of the subject

culture. Likewise, the 'influence' of Japanese tattooing upon Macdonald, Riley and Burchett amounted to the appropriation of an aesthetic.

For many officers, the new tattoo stood for something more than a souvenir or fashion accessory. It was an expression of the martial spirit, where the ability to control physical discomfort acted as a mark of fitness to serve. Neither should we discount Roberts's insistence upon *esprit de corps* as a motive force for regimental tattoos. This is not so far removed from working-class jewellery, with the badge of service connecting the physical body to the metaphorical body of the regiment. An officer's regimental tattoo was, however, differentiated from that of a private by elaborate detail, ornate style and cost. It was a symbol of the ability to consume conspicuously – still an essential skill for the Victorian army officer.

As the tattoo craze in Britain and North America reached its peak in 1899, Veblen published *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, a liberal critique of capitalism which focused upon the reproduction of status through conspicuous and often 'wasteful' consumption. Veblen believed that 'no line of consumption' afforded 'a more apt illustration' of his theory than dress.[76] Both men's and women's fashion signified conspicuous waste (expenditure 'in order to be reputable must be wasteful')[77] and conspicuous leisure (the demonstration that an individual had no need to engage in productive labour). Tattooing played no part in Veblen's analysis, although the craze was integral to the culture upon which he had cast his critical eye. Perhaps tattoos were too inconspicuous: for the most part they were hidden beneath clothing, revealed only at the individual's discretion. But the new tattoo, if inconspicuous, was a leisured and luxurious form of consumption. In 1897, Riley informed Stephen of two special commissions upon which he was working. The first was a reproduction of Landseer's picture 'Dignity and Impudence', which on completion was to measure 12 inches by 9. The other was a copy of Constable's etching 'Mrs Pelham', tattooed upon the chest of 'a Scotch baron'. These copies were achieved in painstaking detail. Riley estimated that the reproduction of a famous picture took up to 80 hours in twelve sittings, at a cost of over 24 guineas.[78] Many of the other designs were oriental in inspiration – dragons being a favourite. These echoed the style of paintings and vases imported from China and Japan, as well as copies made in Britain. It is probable that a detailed tattoo would have cost as much as, if not more than, many of these oriental *objets d'art*.

In Veblen's terms such tattooing was an exercise in 'wasteful' consumption, but its inconspicuousness implied that the impulse for consumption ran deeper than the outward display and emulation of fashionable clothing. There was nothing trivial about this form of tattooing, for it indicated the



A regimental crest by Sutherland Macdonald, from *Strand* magazine (1897).

depth to which economic relations infiltrated the tissues of the body. The commodified and packaged tattoo provided a novel way of reshaping the body within the boundaries of fashion and taste. That many of the designs remained covert, hidden beneath clothing, suggests that the new tattoo also spoke to the tattooed about their ability to consume. This is not to say that the aesthetic designs were devoid of meaning, empty of content beyond the act of consumption. We should avoid the romantic and essentializing impulse to interpret working-class tattoos, by contrast, as somehow more authentic than their bourgeois counterparts. The new tattoos spoke volumes and could serve emotive and meaningful functions. Is it a coincidence, for example, that the naturalist Bolton covered his skin in animals? But, just as the new aesthetic may have articulated similar bonds of attachment to its crude working-class counterparts, it also uttered softly to the financially wealthy self statements like: 'I have travelled'; 'I can spend'; even, 'I have taste'.

BODY COMMODIFICATION?

In several respects the old-style pin-prick tattoo of the working-class subcultures, and the finely detailed tasteful decoration of the new aesthetic were

shaped by similar emotional concerns. But the similarities should not deflect us from the extent to which tattoos both spoke the language of class, and reproduced class and status upon the surface of the body. As indicated at the outset, in purely economic terms tattoos did not, for the vast majority, add value to the body. But they did have a value as vicarious objects of material culture. For the mobile and/or enclosed populations of soldiers, sailors and prisoners the cost of the tattoo was less than the object it substituted. For the conspicuous consumer, the leisured traveller, the globetrotting businessman or the army officer, it could cost more than the equivalent object in material form. For both, the body was remoulded by the culture and economy through which it moved. Tattoos did not commodify the body, but they did indicate the extent to which commodities, however valueless in utilitarian terms, impacted upon the body, producing and reproducing divisions of class and status.