

## **Shooting drug dealers**

**WHEN MY MOTHER WAS IN HER CUPS** she was given to singing mawkish Irish songs about longing and loss. One of her favourites was *The Wild Colonial Boy*, “There was a wild colonial boy / Jack Duggan was his name / He was born and raised in Ireland / in a place called Castlemaine”. It is a ballad about a lad who emigrated to Australia “At the early age of sixteen years”, a lad who robbed the rich and helped the poor, a brave boy who goes down fighting - shot to death by the cops - rather than surrendering to “the Queen’s high name”. I have always assumed, what my Mother knew, that this song was not the celebration of crime but a tragic account of how criminality is often knotted up with oppression and entangled with injustice.

This memory was stirred up last week by the death of Mark Duggan. Last Thursday Mark, was a passenger in a mini-cab, which was stopped in Ferry Lane, Tottenham, when he was shot to death by the police. He was a young black man of 29, the father of four kids. It is rumoured that he was a drug dealer and that shots were fired at the police. I am unable to confirm or deny any of these allegations, but I was outraged by some of the noise from Twitter where some tweeters were suggesting that we should take the shooting of a drug dealer in our stride - it is certainly not, the tweeters tweeted, an occasion for outbursts of public anger or rioting.

Well, it is now widely known that a few hundred people disagreed. They didn’t automatically assume that Mark Duggan was a drug dealer, and they didn’t automatically assume that the police had a right to shoot him whatever he was. They gathered on Saturday outside the police station in Tottenham and demanded answers and explanations from the authorities concerning the killing. After a couple of hours in which neither the police nor their representatives deigned to offer any explanation for

the killing a sixteen-year-old girl in the crowd started to berate the police on the cordon in front of the police station - the officers evidently panicked - and set about the young woman with their batons. All hell broke loose, as the demonstration bubbled rapidly to the boil, and rioting broke out.

Something similar happened in Brixton in September 1985 when the police shot and paralysed Dorothy 'Cherry' Groce during a search of her home. Cherry, who died earlier this year, was a black Londoner who had come from Jamaica at the age of thirteen. She was a hard working mother and grandmother. After her shooting riots broke out between outraged black youth and the police, and the photo-journalist David Hodge died shortly after being badly beaten by looters. A month later Cynthia Jarrett collapsed and died during a search of her home by local police in Tottenham. In the ensuing riot the policeman Keith Blakelock was hacked and beaten to death by black youths. Then three young black men, Winston Silcott, Engin Raghip, and Mark Braithwaite, despite an absence of witnesses and other evidence, were sentenced to life imprisonment for the murder of Blakelock. These convictions were overturned by the Court of Appeal in November 1991 after it was demonstrated that police records of the interrogations had been tampered with. Needless to say, the officer in charge of the interrogation was cleared of perjury and nobody was ever charged with fiddling the evidence.

The pattern is clear. The police during the course of some criminal investigation, or search, kill or injure a black person. A demonstration is called outside the local police station or the town hall. The crowd demands answers and explanations. The cops clam up, refusing to speak either to the victim's family or to their representatives, citing procedures and formal inquiries which might be prejudiced if they dared say a thing. Some minor incident, symbolic of the arrogance of the police and the authorities then occurs - like the rough handling of the young woman in front of protestors at Tottenham police station last Saturday - and the sparks fly into a conflagration.

The police could have visited Mark Duggan's family and given them and their lawyers a detailed description of the circumstances in which he died. The police could have called a public meeting on Friday evening - they could, with the assistance of David Lammy MP, have toured the estates holding a series of question and answer sessions with local people. They would have had a rough ride, they would have found it unpleasant, but they would have kept the lid on the rage by ensuring that the wider community in Tottenham was able to give voice to the legitimate anger which black youngsters feel concerning what they regard as the unfair and oppressive behaviour of the police towards the local community.

Let us be clear. The riot in Tottenham was not a "race riot", Orthodox Jews, other white people, and people of other races were mingling freely with the crowds of black youths who were fighting with the police. This was a riot, like those during the eighties, between black youth and the police. It is caused by many things, but above all it is caused by the criminalisation of large numbers of poorly educated, and often unemployable, black youth. The failure of our schools, colleges, and universities, along with many other institutions to provide these young men and women with the skills necessary for them to survive and flourish lies at the root of these outbursts. While most young black people in Tottenham and elsewhere are neither criminals nor law-breakers they certainly live in circumstances where thieving and dealing in drugs and other contraband is widely regarded as an inevitable consequence of poverty and the lack of legitimate opportunities. People disapprove of crime and hate the disorder, the damage and the broken lives that it brings, but they (like my Mother long ago), understand only too well why it occurs.

The millionaires that govern us will wax indignant in the coming days about the need for firm action against the rioters and looters. They will attempt to mobilise public opinion against the 'wild colonial boys' of Tottenham and elsewhere. They will, I predict, be met with much success. The policy of repression advocated by David

Cameron from his villa in Tuscany, and from Teresa May at the Home Office in Westminster, will be genuinely popular, not least in Tottenham and other areas blighted by poverty and disorder. However, the increasingly authoritarian stand being taken by the authorities towards rioters, demonstrators, peaceful protestors, indeed against anybody who refuses to be pushed around by tax cheats, crony capitalists, or by the police, who appear to the poor, to be literally in the pay of the wealthy, can only have one result. More riots and more disorder.

What are we to say to the young people trapped, endlessly on the dole, on grim estates in London, and up and down the country, "Yes, of course, police constables keep stopping and searching you - after all - you look like criminals in your sports clothes and gaudy jewellery, don't you? You fit the profile! . . . On the other hand, if you got a job and pulled your pants up, the cops would tell you the time rather than humiliate you. You might even be able to ask them directions when you're lost!"

This, like the huffing and puffing of the authorities, and the indignation of politicians, is absolute nonsense. Two things must happen, the police must be readily held to account for their actions - they must explain in a thorough and timely fashion why they have killed someone, and they must be prosecuted when they are found to have committed crimes against those whom they are supposed to serve. Secondly, means must be found to ensure that young people are well educated and well trained enough in order to be able to enter the labour market with some realistic prospect of advancement. Only this will dampen the attraction and excuses for law breaking and criminality, which abound among poorer people in our country.

Perhaps more importantly, in a society in which the rich break the spirit and the letter of the law with apparent impunity, a society in which those in authority are rarely held to account for their anti-social behaviour, or even their crimes, it is absurd to imagine that one can lecture the disadvantaged on the virtues of social solidarity and good conduct.