Fingerprints: The Origins of Crime Detection and the Murder Case That Launched Forensic Science by Colin Beavan

The fascinating story of a scientific breakthrough that solved one of the most brutal murders in England's history and forever changed the criminal justice system. Fingerprints is the dramatic human story of how technology found its way into the criminal justice system, of one brilliant, flawed man's struggle to retain rightful credit for his discovery, and of a confoundingly difficult murder case. Impeccably researched and dramatically told, it traces fingerprinting to its present-day applications and illustrates why the unique tracks we leave with our fingers continue to be one of the most important means of identifying criminals.

Mark Twain's 1894 book "The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson" noted that the lines on the insides of the hands and feet uniquely identified a human being. The use of physical evidence was pioneered by Vidocq in Napoleonic France in 1812. The reduction of hanging in Britain resulted in the need to identify prior offenders. Chapter 1 begins with a murder in 1902 Deptford. No eyewitnesses, no murder weapon; only a thumbprint on the cashbox. A milkman and his helper had seen two men leaving that shop, but could not pick them out from a line-up. One thumbprint linked one man to the crime. Physical evidence had been distrusted as being too vulnerable to manipulation (p.18). The Dark Ages of England saw "trial by ordeal" as the origin of modern criminal proceedings (p.22). This was an advance over blood feuds and clan war (p.23). Next investigating juries replaced trial by ordeal. Trial by combat was on the law books until 1817. Defendants could not call their own witnesses, there was no use of physical evidence.

Vidocq pioneered modern police detection (p.30). The Sepoy Mutiny in India was put down with terror tactics that recalls the Nazi SS (p.41). Afterwards the Indians used passive resistance, like repudiating signed contracts. William Herschel used handprints for a signature that couldn't be denied (p.42). Later he used fingerprints to verify contracts. The science of criminology began in the 19th century. A poor economy generated more crime (p.51). The Case of the Tichbourne Claimant showed the need for reliable identification (pp.58-59). Chapter 4 has the life of Henry Faulds, a medical missionary in Japan, who realized fingerprints could identify an individual (p.72). Faulds' article in `Nature' 10-28-1880 "was the first in the scientific literature to suggest the basic concepts of the fingerprint system of identification" (p.74).

Chapter 5 is about the life and career of Alphonse Bertillon who invented a system of identifying criminals. Analysis of French army recruits revealed a wide range of bodily dimensions. The solution was a rapid search of records by physical measurements (a decision table) This new system attracted others, like Francis Galton (p.93). Chapter 6 tells of this impressive but flawed figure (pp.98-99). [If Galton stole from Faulds it could be due to heredity (p.104)!] Galton's 1992 book "Finger Prints" was very comprehensive and provided a systematic proof (p.110). Chapter 7 tells of the first use of fingerprints to identify a criminal in 1892 Argentina. Juan Vucetich's system would be used in much of South America. Bertillon's method was so successful that most French criminals stopped using false names (p.126). Fingerprints were taken directly and correctly (p.127). The British adopted Bertillon's classification of measurement, and fingerprints, for identification. Faulds' system was more sophisticated (p.131). Azizul Haque invented a classification system less prone to error and faster (p.141). This was adopted in 1897 British India.
Edward Henry's paper on fingerprint classification gained him recognition (p.149). The arrest and conviction of Adolf Beck by mistaken identification advanced the method of fingerprinting. Fingerprints as a reliable method of identification was sanctioned at the trial of the Stratton brothers, convicted and executed on the basis of one thumbprint (Chapter 10). [The British substance `paraffin' is called `kerosene' in America (p.173).] The Illinois Supreme Court made a landmark ruling for fingerprint identification (p.193). France adopted fingerprinting after Bertillon died. [When there are no fingerprints the Bertillon practice of measuring bones is used for identification.] The `Epilogue' notes the importance of fingerprints today, and explains why. After a century of use, no one has ever proved that a person's fingerprints are unique. But it has never been disproved.

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