

Forensic science has its faults

The Herald. Glasgow (UK): Mar 12, 2001. pg. 15

Copyright Scottish Media Newspapers, Ltd. and Scottish Media Publishing Limited Mar 12, 2001

Pace the gentleman (Letters, March 8) who has written a novel about the death penalty being reintroduced into the UK, we are still a very long way from being able to rely on forensic science to convict only the truly guilty.

Many murder convictions don't depend on forensics, as with Michael Stone who must now be retried after an important witness-statement at his original trial was shown to be perjured.

Many so-called forensic experts are near-amateurs who will say whatever the legal team that employs them wants - as famously happened in the US with Kenny Richey, who was convicted of an arson- murder on the testimony of a forensic non-expert, even though real forensic experts insist the fatal fire was a pure accident probably caused by an electrical fault.

Even genuine forensic experts may disagree about the interpretation of evidence, as with the Louise Woodward case in the US. A good UK example is the case of Sin Jenkins, convicted because a forensic expert said that minute droplets of blood found on Jenkins's clothes must have been formed during the fatal assault - while other equally qualified experts insist the droplets could have come from a feeble last breath or a bubble of blood bursting when the body was moved after death, and that Jenkins may have found the victim already dead or dying, as he claimed.

Genuine experts - and police - can also be careless or plain dishonest, even when dealing with something as simple as fingerprints. It was less than a year ago that The Herald itself reported on "the case of Shirley McKie, who was accused of lying about a fingerprint at a murder trial. The chief inspector of constabulary, Mr William Taylor, exonerated Ms McKie and concluded that the Scottish Criminal Records Office Fingerprint Bureau was "not fully effective and efficient" - which was putting it mildly.

Claire M Jordan, 31 Balfour Street, Edinburgh.