

SOME HISTORICAL CONTEXT TO *THE MARAIS ASSASSIN*

Anarchists

In the spring of 1892, a series of anarchist bombings brought fear to the streets of Paris. These bombings were acts of revenge for the capture and imprisonment of fellow anarchists. The bomber responsible was the notorious criminal, Ravachol. On the eve of Ravachol's trial, there was another bombing at the Restaurant Véry, the scene of his arrest. At the trial, despite the public prosecutor's best efforts, Ravachol was spared the death penalty, and given a life sentence of hard labour. Two months later, Ravachol received the death penalty for a murder committed in 1891. He was guillotined on 11 July. Ravachol was successfully arrested, tried and convicted thanks to the innovative method of 'Bertillonage'. Invented by the biometrics researcher Alphonse Bertillon, it used anthropometrics, the comparative study of the sizes and proportions of the human body, to create a unique profile for every individual that could then be applied in the detection of a crime. The British polymath Francis Galton, who worked out the potential flaws of the method, later went on to discover the forensic value of fingerprinting.

Java Man

In the late nineteenth century, the debate was raging between the creationist beliefs of the Church and its adherents, and the scientific establishment who supported Charles Darwin's theory of evolution. The German evolutionary biologist, Ernst Haeckel, who had studied the theories of French naturalist Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, developed the idea of the 'missing link', a supposed evolutionary stage between the great apes and man. Struck by the similarity between the embryos of humans and gibbons, he speculated that the missing link might have lived in the locations where gibbons were still to be found. Inspired by Haeckel, Eugene Dubois, a young Dutch anatomist working as a military surgeon in Sumatra, made some extraordinary archaeological discoveries in Java in 1891. On the banks of the River Solo he unearthed a skullcap, femur and some teeth belonging to a hominid that became known as Java Man. The skullcap was too small to be that of an ape and smaller than a human skullcap. This apparent discovery of *pithecanthropus*, an intermediate stage between man and the apes, caused much controversy and debate throughout the world. However, we now know that Java Man was not in fact the missing link, as his skeleton, though primitive, is that of a man of the Middle Palaeolithic era.