
In the mid-1980s Professor Anne Crowther, in a review of a number of books on the history of crime, remarked on the fact that modern Scotland was a country without a criminal past. This was a clarion call intended to stimulate research into this noticeably neglected aspect of the Scottish past. Unfortunately, Crowther’s call has fallen on deaf ears, for, apart from a number of purely anecdotal accounts by former policemen and some commemorative institutional histories, there are only a few published articles by serious historians to draw on. Ian Donnachie’s pioneering study of nineteenth-century criminal statistics in the mid 1980s and 1990, and a recent book by Anne-Marie Kilday on women and violence in eighteenth-century Scotland, constitute the main body of historical work on crime in Scotland. Historians north of the border for whatever reason, unlike their colleagues in England, Continental Europe and America, have shied away from this area of historical inquiry. The same can be said about the origins and development of policing in Scotland. Considering the importance of policing for understanding the pacification of political radicalism, the domestication of plebeian culture, and the growth of civil society in nineteenth-century Scotland, it is astonishing that all we have to consult is the odd thesis, as well as a study of the origins of rural policing by W.G. Carson and H. Idzikowska published in the 1980s. Moreover, given that Scotland’s model of policing was, according to David Barrie, more in keeping with provincial England and continental Europe (p. 148), one might also have expected a raft of comparative studies between these areas, but in this we are disappointed. Thus, this new book on the development of policing in urban Scotland in the eighteenth
and nineteenth centuries is most welcome, and one can only hope it encourages more research into this vital area of social relations.

What Barrie does in an entirely compelling and persuasive manner is to chart the shift from individual responsibility for policing through voluntary bodies, such as the Town Guard or Night or Day Watch forces, to collective responsibility in the form of a permanent police force: that is, the transition from performing services to paying for them out of local taxation. The path, however, was never smooth and Barrie meticulously charts the complicated and tortuous politics of the foundation of Police Commissions and their eventual absorption by town councils. In dealing with the transition from amateur to professional policing Barrie has rejected a number of explanations which have tried to argue that this process can only be understood as a reaction to economic and social crisis and the class struggles which ensued from it. As he says, ‘underlying reform was a desire to better regulate and improve urban environments … not just control one section of society’ (p. 103). Moreover, reform in most of the major burghs pre-dated post-Napoleonic war economic and social tensions, thus, ‘there was no impending sense of crisis prior to reform’ (p. 105). Rejecting a Marxian analysis, Barrie opts for a multi-causal explanation of reform; one which emphasizes the role of Enlightenment ideas of improvement, allied to Evangelical zeal for reforming the masses, and the desire to protect property, as well as to combat vagrancy.

While the argument is convincing, there are a number of areas that need further elucidation and research. Firstly, Barrie quite rightly dismisses the stereotypical ineffectual thesis of amateur policing in eighteenth-century, claiming that although mainly performed on a part-time basis in most burghs ‘the system was not necessarily unprofessional in its workings’ (p.31). What he might have pointed out was that crime statistics (although virtually unknowable at this time) were perhaps low in spite of an amateur police force due to the fact that the punishment for petty crime was disproportional to the act, for example, one could be executed for stealing a cow, or transported for fourteen years for stealing a dress. Deterrence was achieved through draconian laws. Secondly, there is the question of legitimacy. Historians such as Robert Storch have pointed to working-class resistance to the introduction of
policing in the north of England, and in particular to the watching brief given to the police. This resistance not only took the form of physical opposition to police presence, but also verbal assaults. Police were viewed as parasites and commonly referred to as ‘locusts,’ ‘bluebottles,’ and so on. Barrie says that although there were no specifically ‘anti-police riots’ in Glasgow, during the 1848 Chartist demonstrations the police were met with cries of ‘Murder the bastards; kill every one of them.’ However, the footnote refers to work by Storch, who, as far as I know, has not written on Glasgow. It is simply not good enough to say that ‘there was clearly simmering anti-police resentment among a sizeable section of the lower orders’ without a shred of evidence to support this contention. Alan Campbell’s work on Scottish miners might have been consulted as it shows that in mining communities the relationship with the police was fragile if not downright hostile, particularly during industrial disputes. Indeed, it would have been helpful if the social and geographical aspects of legitimacy had been examined in more detail.

However, this is not in any way to minimize the contribution Barrie has made to our understanding and knowledge of the origins and development of policing in Scotland during the crucial period of transition between pre-industrial society and 1865. For that he deserves our hearty congratulations.

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