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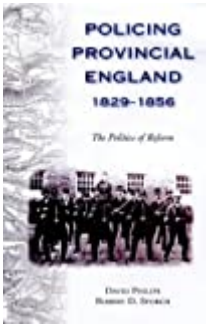

David Philips, Robert D. Storch. *Policing Provincial England, 1829-1856: The Politics of Reform.* London and New York: Leicester University Press, 1999. x + 342 pp. $75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7185-0112-9.

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Dogberry's demise

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The governing of Britain in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has recently received renewed scholarly attention. The questions that currently exercise historians are why and how the influence of the executive grew in the first half of the nineteenth century and what affect it had on the other spheres of government: or, to put it another way, the extent to which Britain was governed by the Whitehall departments of state by the middle of the century. This is the general issue which this admirable book illuminates. Its particular subject is the process which led in 1856 to the passage of a bill requiring all the English counties to establish police forces paid for out locally raised taxation (the rates). On the surface this could appear to have been an almost inevitable assumption of responsibility by central government.

The principal features of such an interpretation might be as follows. In the early 1820s England and Wales were "policed" by constables recruited increasingly from the labouring and artisan classes who, although they were appointed by parish and other local government bodies, were remunerated chiefly by the victims of crime. The ineffectiveness of this historic patchwork of crime detection was most apparent in London. Thus in 1829 Wellington's government established paid police under Home Office supervision in the metropolis, Peel arguing that the fears of the country gentlemen that a centrally-controlled police force threatened individual liberties and local autonomy had to give way to the probability that it was the only way of protecting the essentials of their liberty (life and property) from ever increasing crime.

The historic system having been breached, as it were, it might seem almost inevitable, given the scale of socio-economic change, that the experiment of paid police acting under Home Office supervision would be extended to the rest of the country, thus sweeping away the autonomy of the myriad of local authorities and the landed elites which largely ran them. The process itself seems to have had that characteristic. In 1836-39 a Royal Commission which was dominated apparently by Chadwick, the centralising enthusiast, reported in favour of such a system. However, Melbourne's government, acting in conformity with one interpretation of the Whigs as cautious and lethargic in the face of utilitarian enthusiasms

and aristocratic resistance to dwindling local power, produced two acts in 1839 and 1840 which permitted counties to establish paid police forces but did not oblige them to do so. These were therefore half-hearted measures which served only to delay the inevitable – which came with the act of 1856.

The great merit of this book is that its extensive and imaginative research destroys such an interpretation and demonstrates how complex and unpredictable the process of change actually was. Chapter two shows convincingly that although the social status of parish constables had declined significantly by the 1820s, there were many who were much more effective in carrying out their responsibilities than some contemporary detractors alleged. Indeed in some areas magistrates and others had successfully adapted the role of the constable to meet contemporary needs (p. 35). Further, we are provided with solid evidence in Chapter five that various initiatives were taken in the 1830s by "core justices" to devise new systems of rural policing that suited particular needs.

These, we are told, took four forms: the establishment of paid police under the terms of local acts of Parliament; their appointment under the terms of the general Lighting and Watching Act sponsored by Joseph Hume in 1833; those appointed and paid for by voluntary subscriptions on the part of local property owners; and those appointed by parish authorities and paid for out of the poor rates. In other words the choice for contemporaries was not between an "efficient," centrally-imposed and centrally-supervised system on the one hand and a uniformly "inefficient," archaic system on the other: there was some efficiency and considerable adaptation and experimentation within the historic "system."

It was also not the case that the politics of change were dominated by were a small group of "enlightened" metropolitan centralisers on the one hand and "reactionary" provincial elites determined to retain their local autonomy on the other. Chapters 3 and 4 chart the growth of support for a new rural police amongst MPs of all parties and, more significantly, amongst a substantial proportion of the provincial gentry. In the case of the last, the authors provide particularly important evidence showing that a substantial number of magistrates and gentry adopted the "gospel of (crime) prevention" (p. 46) which the new style metropolitan police seemed to herald in response to the collapse of paternalism and the growth of disorder in the countryside in the period between the end of the Napoleonic wars and the Swing riots. Moreover fresh urgency was given to the search for a solution by the decision of the Poor Law Commissioners in March 1836 to prevent the new Poor Law Unions from paying constables for their efforts. This had the quite "unanticipated" effect (p. 56) in many quarters of the country of constables declining to do their job unless victims of crime promised rewards in advance. A random, unpredictable, decision therefore placed even greater strains on the old "system."

Nor did the 1839 and 1840 acts which laid the foundations for the new system have much to do with Chadwick and his Royal Commission. In an outstanding dissection of the Commission's work and the background to the acts, the authors show convincingly that Chadwick tried to doctor the evidence to suit his pre-conceived ideal of a compulsory, centrally-controlled, system; that the real author of the acts was not the Commission but Russell; and that Russell was moved to act by a combination of the propitious circumstances provided by Chartist disturbances and by the initiative of the Shropshire and other Quarter Sessions in proposing the creation of county police forces under Quarter Sessions' control. Circumstances rather than theory or a limp preference for compromise between irritating, opposing, forces therefore disposed Russell to act.

The complexity of this process of change did not end there. The point that the authors repeatedly make in their analysis of events up to 1839 is that the process was not driven by a debate between those who wished to increase executive control and those who wished to resist it in the interests of local autonomy. Rather, it involved continuous debate between senior politicians and provincial elites and within the provincial elite as a whole. It was this which leads the authors to argue, quite rightly in my view, that the permissive quality of the 1839-40 acts should not lead them to be regarded as a feeble half-way house or, in their terms, "a damp squib" (p. 163). On the contrary, the process of change in early nineteenth-century Britain was strongly influenced by a tradition of "trial and error" legislation: of taking a legislative initiative, seeing how it worked and then amending or building upon it in the light of experience. The acts can therefore be regarded as essential foundations for the compulsory system established in 1856.

Further, the acts themselves stimulated even greater debate in the localities as Quarter Sessions wrestled with the question of whether to set up new police and pay for them out of the rates. Altogether some 30 counties decided to do so by 1856 but only after considerable

heart-searching conducted in Quarter Sessions' meetings attended by the public and reported extensively in the provincial press. The authors analyse these debates with great thoroughness and once again the results may surprise us. Thus in part of Chapter 7 and in Chapter 8 it emerges that the argument turned more on the detail of local control and the cost to the ratepayer than that of the issue of central direction versus local autonomy. Moreover the reasons why some counties established police forces under the acts and others did not were varied and complex – the location of the county, its socio-economic structure, the political hue of the Quarter Sessions and the strength or weakness of ratepayer resistance, all playing a part.

Overall this is a deeply researched and well constructed book with which I have no significant quibble. The only question that remained in my mind after reading it is how far a more extensive trawl than the authors could be expected to have conducted of the correspondence of the gentry in provincial record offices might modify or alter the picture presented here. Such is the extent of the research that they have carried out (evident in the historiographical introduction, the bibliography and the extensive tables and notes) my guess is that it would not be significant. Here, then, is a very strong argument that in the case of provincial policing, the process of change that led to greater, but not absolute, control of the executive over the local authorities was complex and unpredictable. Further, the authors reveal a remarkable degree of negotiation and accommodation between senior politicians, ordinary back-benchers and the leaders of provincial England. Reading this book sometimes suggested that the only outsiders in this process were the zealots of reform.

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