



**David Taylor.** *Policing the Victorian Town: The Development of the Police in Middlesbrough, c. 1840-1914.* Houndmills and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002. xv + 237 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-333-65239-8.



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## Policing the English Frontier

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In 1862 W. E. Gladstone described the fast growing industrial town of Middlesbrough as “the infant Hercules.” A century later the historian Asa Briggs compared the town in its early days with the rough and ready Australian frontier town of Ballarat. At the beginning of the nineteenth century Middlesbrough was scarcely a dot on the landscape of north Yorkshire. It had four houses and twenty-five inhabitants. By 1841 the population had grown to around 5,500, and thirty years later it was 40,000. The mid-century town was a booming centre of heavy industry. It was built on the railway, on coal, iron, steel, engineering, and shipbuilding. Its furnaces and workshops sucked in young male workers who were eager for the good wages offered by industry and who had been brought up on ideas of a working-class masculinity based on toughness and physicality. Good industrial wages in good years fostered drinking and brawling in the streets; economic slumps fostered anger and aggression. These developments in the first two-thirds of the century coincided with the introduction of the new police across England. In *Policing the Victorian Town* David

Taylor presents a detailed assessment of crime, public order, and the development of the police in this unique and turbulent industrial setting.

The book is divided into two chronological periods. The first deals with Middlesbrough’s explosive growth in the first two-thirds of the nineteenth century. Discrete chapters assess respectively the town’s growth and its economy, the first years of the new police, the scale and variety of crime, and the relationship between police and public. The second half of the book sees a similar chapter division from the 1870s to the beginning of the First World War. It is based on what appears to be a thorough trawl of local sources and the narrative is situated in a broad understanding of the current debates about crime and policing in the Victorian period.

When police history began to be taken seriously by academic social historians some twenty-five years ago, the inspiration for many was Bob Storch’s pioneering and revisionist assessment of the Victorian Bobby as a domestic missionary wielding his baton to discipline the burgeoning working class. There were probably few Victorian towns that, to contemporaries between 1840 and

1870, can have needed such domestic missionaries as Middlesbrough. Yet, as Taylor shows, the police were relatively few in the early years. A steady increase during the 1860s saw the number of men on the establishment rise from thirteen to thirty-nine, with another fifteen or so men privately funded by local firms. But the pay was not particularly good and the assault figures were such that, on average, a constable might find himself attacked once or twice a year sufficiently seriously for a charge to be pressed. Many recruits left after a short time; many more were dismissed or were required to leave for the usual offences of the early policeman, notably drunkenness. A cadre of long-serving, apparently dependable men did develop however. There were some spectacular successes, in particular Police Sergeant William Ashe's pursuit of the embezzling borough accountant Thomas Cameron Close. Ashe's quest took him to Australia, where he got his man and then brought him home to Middlesbrough in triumph. Seven years later, in 1883, Ashe was appointed the town's chief constable, a post that he was to hold until 1901. But Ashe's career was exceptional. Most men could not expect to reach such a place in the police hierarchy. If they stuck with the job, at least the pay was regular. There were a few perks, some of them illicit such as free drinks from publicans or pay-offs from prostitutes and bookmakers. There was also the chance of a pension at the end of service.

The recorded crime rate in Middlesbrough largely followed that of the rest of the country from the 1870s, generally levelling out. By the end of the century it was no longer the wild industrial frontier town of its early years and while the danger of assault and violent confrontation had not disappeared, the policeman's lot was probably a much happier one. The question, of course, is the extent to which the police were themselves responsible for the reduction in the crime and public order problems in the town. Or was it rather urban maturity, and the broad spread and emulation of certain cultural values that played the crucial role? Taylor touches on this question, but he also skirts around it. The question is not one that can be answered easily or measured conclusively, but it is something that the historian of policing must confront.

In the most simplistic form the historian might ask simply, what difference did the Middlesbrough police make? Crime fell, public decorum was improved, but,

while Middlesbrough may have experienced a more turbulent period during its origins, the overall social improvement appears to have been the same everywhere. The new police in Middlesbrough, of course, did not spend their time doing nothing. They patrolled the streets at night checking that doors and windows were locked. They confronted some drunks, some brawlers, and some domestic abusers; their presence may have dissuaded some opportunist thieves from seizing an opportunity. But how far did this contribute to a change in behaviour? There were instances, the arrest of individuals in Irish districts of the town, for example, that positively invited trouble. And if the police were more accepted, or at least more tolerated at the turn of the century, how far was this the result of other things that they contributed to a better-regulated society: by the control of traffic for example? or by the tidying of the streets through moving on street sellers, loiterers, noisy and playful children? by dealing with runaway horses and dangerous dogs?

One area that Taylor might have developed a little more is that of the civilian control of the police. Watch committees had considerable authority over borough police in the Victorian period, though often, as in Middlesbrough, they appear to have left effective chief or head constables to get on with day-to-day matters of discipline and deployment. Taylor notes the regularity of meetings in the early years and the long service of some of the members of the committee. But the longevity of service and the regularity of meetings conceivably meant that there were men on the committee who were as much experts in police management and policy as many of the sergeants and above in the force. Historians have, to date, been slow to explore the composition of these committees, the men's backgrounds and politics, their position in their community, the extent of their role in policing, and their committees' overall relationships with the town councils.

These criticisms should not, however, detract from the overall usefulness of this volume. Too much of the police history of England has focused on the experience of London. By implication Taylor usefully reminds his readers that there was much more to the policing of Victorian England than the policing of London. His book is well researched and well argued, adding significant detail to our knowledge and understanding of the issues.

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