Keith Laybourn (with David Taylor), *The Battle for the Roads of Britain: Police Motorists and the Law, c 1890-1970*

Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, 238 p., ISBN: 978-0-230-35932-1

Robert M. Morris

Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/chs/2224>

DOI: 10.4000/chs.2224

ISSN: 1663-4837

Publisher

Librairie Droz

Printed version

Date of publication: 31 October 2018

Number of pages: 149-152

ISSN: 1422-0857

Electronic reference

Robert M. Morris, "Keith Laybourn (with David Taylor), *The Battle for the Roads of Britain: Police Motorists and the Law, c 1890-1970*", *Crime, Histoire & Sociétés / Crime, History & Societies* [Online], Vol. 22, n°1 | 2018, Online since 31 December 2018, connection on 14 January 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/chs/2224> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/chs.2224>

This text was automatically generated on 14 January 2021.

© Droz

Keith Laybourn (with David Taylor), *The Battle for the Roads of Britain: Police Motorists and the Law, c 1890-1970*

Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, 238 p., ISBN: 978-0-230-35932-1

Robert M. Morris

REFERENCES

Keith Laybourn (with David Taylor), *The Battle for the Roads of Britain: Police Motorists and the Law, c 1890-1970*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, 238 p., ISBN: 978-0-230-35932-1

- 1 The great economic and personal benefits brought by motor vehicles came with a downside: their challenge to the maintenance of order on the roads and a degree of human carnage from death and injury that raised difficult questions of how governments should most effectually respond.
- 2 In a broadly chronological account, the book explores responses predominantly from the police point of view. Impressive diligence marshals a great variety of sources including from provincial areas to give non-metropolitan depth of field. Laybourn and Taylor first tackled the subject in a policing study over 1918-1938¹ and the present book extends coverage to the whole of arguably the most contentious era of the development of motor traffic control. The need to order a great deal of material means that the book is not always an easy read, and a relative lack of comparative material inhibits the reader from gauging how far British experience was typical. That said, the outcome will undoubtedly remain a principal source for the understanding of the enforcement dimension.

- 3 Contextualising the nature of the resources – still 186 police forces in England and Wales in 1918, for example² – available to respond, the current book first deals with enforcing the law on the motorist and, secondly, with engineering the environment and road safety issues. The police were initially reluctant to accept any role wider than enforcing the law. There was also a persisting distaste for using the criminal law for what were regarded as regulatory purposes.
- 4 Until the 1950s, private motorists were predominantly middle and upper class people, some of whom, moreover, had tended to view the police as their servants. Controversy raged about speed limits – during 1930-4 an upper limit was actually abolished – speed traps, covert surveillance and so on. The motorists, backed by growing manufacturing interests, developed large and powerful lobbying organisations. The largest ran patrol services to assist their members and controversially employed “scouts” to warn members of nearby “speed traps”. Gradually, the police developed a more sophisticated understanding of how to conceptualise the range of problems posed by the growing number of motor vehicles. This was “the holistic approach to traffic policing – Enforcement, Engineering and Education”.³
- 5 Laybourn shows that the police were not over-awed by the motoring lobbies but did feel insufficiently supported by the courts. They thought the courts too lenient and particularly reluctant to disqualify drivers. On the other hand, the quality of police observation evidence (assessing incapacity from alcohol and of “carelessness” in its varying degrees) did not easily satisfy normal criminal criteria. Further, the application of interpersonal offence categories like manslaughter to motoring environments was not invariably a good fit.
- 6 The arrival of mass motoring from the 1950s greatly intensified demands on the police. Responses included “civilianisation” of parking enforcement, and the creation of motorways both to respond to congestion and as a form of segregating pedestrians. The armoury of enforcement was increased by refining offences and increasing their impact.⁴ Road engineering became an increasingly sophisticated part of local and national planning systems. Wider and more targeted efforts were made to educate pedestrians, especially children, and pedestrian interests and safety prioritised by measures like Zebra crossings and School Crossing Patrols. Technological improvements included the introduction of parking meters, CCTV and radar devices. Above all, Laybourn rates the introduction of scientific blood/alcohol testing from 1967 as the high point of a long and ultimately successful series of counter-measures tempering the unqualified dominance of the roads that the motoring lobby had secured.
- 7 Laybourn follows Clive Emsley’s 1993 article⁵ in supporting Vic Gatrell’s view that the nineteenth century saw the creation of a “policeman-state” where the police “were intended to be the impersonal agents of central policy”.⁶ Less convincingly, Laybourn contends – going beyond Gatrell – that the policeman-state’ led to a situation where the police “have always sought to apply the law impartially”.⁷ While it is true that the police did come round to that position, Laybourn’s own account shows that this was not universally their early reaction: at another level the interests of the pedestrian were effectively discounted – if not by the police alone – against those of the motorist.
- 8 Gatrell’s 1990 article was concerned with synthesising a Marxist “history from below” and its criticism of an older “positivist” historiography into a new understanding of “crime”. He did not instance traffic control in his survey and, arguably, additional ways

of looking at the early responses to “motorisation” relatively unexplored in the book are arguments about agency and social control. Although the police undoubtedly had a responsibility for public order, they hesitated over accepting its extension to include unprecedented traffic control requirements. Gatrell’s insight that the trope of “crime” was a receptacle for larger social anxieties also helps to explain why, because their role in “fighting” crime had been foregrounded, the police failed initially to grasp the primacy of their public order role and its implications for the depth of their responsibility. At the same time they were not isolated actors in facing up to problems whose fuller economic and planning implications were only gradually revealed. It follows that to claim that a watershed was reached in the mid- and late 1960s “which changed the balance of control of the road in favour of the police and eventually brought enormous improvements in road safety”⁸ may attribute too great a degree of agency to the police alone.

- 9 Certainly, police officials like Metropolitan police officer Alker Tripp came to see that effective response required mobilising new species of physical planning co-operation in a strategy that did not simply focus on traffic offenders: “Road safety cannot be regarded merely as an important item; it must become a dominant factor, governing, as need be, all else in town and country planning”.⁹ Though effective enforcement remained vital, what became increasingly apparent was that the behavioural changes sought were beyond what enforcement alone could achieve. Crucial also were the changes in public attitudes in the face of an unabating toll of death and injury which, with the development of objective alcohol testing, meant the full range of alcohol impairment could finally be tackled in the later 1960s.

- 10 Whether the title’s overriding – and eye-catching – metaphor of battle is quite right to describe the perplexity out of which the authorities sought to respond to unprecedented problems, the country undoubtedly struggled to establish effective national policies. As Plowden pointed out in his 1971 study, there were inadequacies at the core of the machinery of government itself:

Comprehensive planning... was still impracticable. This was partly due to the structure of British government: the policy outputs from the Cabinet continued to be little more than the sum of the several departmental inputs.¹⁰

- 11 More effective planning earlier might have helped but the human dimension of socialising good road disciplines within the population at large was a baffling problem requiring unprecedented forms of national leadership and effort. Nowadays, Britain stands fourth behind only Norway (first), Malta and Sweden in having the lowest road casualty rates amongst forty-nine developed nations, a remarkable decline.¹¹ The struggle is not, however, over. New perils – inconsiderate use of mobile phones for example – appear. At the time of writing, the Mayor of London intends to lower speed limits to 20 miles an hour in central areas further to reduce accidents and their severity. If it remains a battle, it is not one that can ever be over.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Emsley C., ““Mother, what *did* policemen do when there weren’t any motors?”: The law, the police and the regulation of motor traffic in England, 1900-1939”, *The Historical Journal*, 1993, p. 357-381.

Gatrell V. A. C., “Crime, authority and the policeman-state”, in Thompson F. M. L. (ed.) *The Cambridge Social History of Britain 1750-1950*, Vol. 3, p. 243-310.

Jackson L. and Cracknell R., *Road accident casualties in Britain and the World*, House of Commons Library Briefing Paper CBP-7615, April 2018.

Laybourn K. and Taylor D., *Policing in England and Wales, 1918-39: The Fed, Flying Squads and Forensics*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

Plowden W., *The Motor Car and Politics 1896-1970*, London, Bodley Head, 1971.

Tripp, H. Alker, *Town Planning and Road Traffic*, London, Arnold, 1942.

NOTES

1. Laybourn K. and Taylor D., 2011.
 2. The programme of force amalgamations 1967-72 reduced their number to 43 and may have helped make enforcement more strategic and effective in the period *after* that studied by Laybourn,
 3. Laybourn 2015, p. 17.
 4. The writer recalls quiet satisfaction in the Criminal Department of the Home Office at the Road Traffic Act 1962’s introduction of “totting-up” of past licence endorsements for automatic disqualification.
 5. Emsley 1993.
 6. Gatrell, p. 260.
 7. Laybourn 2015, p. ix.
 8. *Ibid*, p. 189.
 9. Tripp, p. 111. The book has a gushing foreword by no less than Patrick Abercrombie (1879-1957), architect and visionary town planner.
 10. Plowden, p. 420.
 11. Jackson and Cracknell, p. 10.
-

AUTHORS

ROBERT M. MORRIS

Visiting Research Fellow, Open University; formerly Home Office 1961-97
 morrisrm238[at]tiscali.co.uk