Mark Radford, *The Policing of Belfast 1870-1914*

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Aogán Mulcahy

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REFERENCES

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- 1 The Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) is widely credited with serving as a “model” for policing across the British empire and playing a prominent role in the historical development of policing internationally. While efforts to assess this claim have generated a considerable and ongoing debate, and led to important qualifications regarding the actual extent of the RIC’s influence and legacy, it remains the case that the policing “model” that prevailed within Ireland during the era of the RIC was not completely standardized: it varied across time and space. In this absorbing study, Radford’s focus is on the policing of Belfast from 1870-1914. This time-period extends from shortly after the disbandment of Belfast Town Police in 1865 and its replacement by the RIC, through to the outbreak of the first world war and all of the political upheaval associated with nationalist efforts to secure greater autonomy for Ireland (“home rule”) and unionist efforts to prevent it.
- 2 While the Belfast Town Police was disbanded essentially because of concerns that it was overly “localised” and largely controlled by Belfast City Council, its replacement by the RIC brought significant tensions to the fore. The RIC (initially the Irish Constabulary) had emerged as an armed and militaristic force, with a broad range of functions including crime prevention and detection, responding to subversion and political violence, and also serving as the public face of the British administration in a wide range of banal settings. While it had played key roles in suppressing various rebellions (for which it was rewarded with the title “Royal”), the bulk of the rank-and-file were

Catholics. Moreover, much of the force's reputation was built on policing rural Ireland rather than the main cities (Dublin also had its own police force, the Dublin Metropolitan Police, until the 1920s), so the extension of the RIC's role to Belfast proved a key test of the force's ability to police a contested urban setting. Thus Radford states his goal: "to examine in detail all aspects of the RIC in Belfast in order to determine if a semi-military constabulary adapted successfully to the problems that a city posed" (p. 2).

- 3 Belfast, however, was not a "typical" city. It was expanding in terms of population and economic activity. Moreover, it was highly volatile, the "social volcano of the Empire" (p. 2). Belfast witnessed sporadic rioting during the first half of the 1800s, while in the second half of the century there were serious riots in 1857, 1864, 1872, 1876, 1880, 1884, 1886, 1893 and 1898. A majority of the city's population was Protestant, but the proportion of Catholics grew over the years, and their greater visibility and assertiveness in calling for political reforms brought a sharp edge to inter-group relations, particularly between working class communities.
- 4 Radford draws on a wide range of historical sources to present an analysis of the lived experience of RIC officers and the nature of police-public relations amidst the social complexity of sectarian and political divisions in Belfast at this time. He demonstrates how the lives of officers were highly circumscribed, governed by strict regulations, long working hours, sometimes very harsh discipline, and poor pay and conditions. Indeed, one of the persistent themes in the book is the low morale that existed within the RIC, giving rise to significant numbers of resignations, agitation for better conditions, and often reduced efficiency. While this is a valuable addition to our knowledge of the internal world of policing, the book's focus on the external world of policing – relations with the public – is particularly revealing. Here Radford highlights how relations with both Catholic and Protestant communities were uneasy and often difficult. Protestants were resentful at the loss of the Town Police and its replacement by a force of largely Catholic rank-and-file. Catholics were skeptical of a force which played such a prominent role in maintaining the union. Securing the support of these antagonistic groups while maintaining its effectiveness and professionalism was an enduring challenge for the RIC.
- 5 Despite Belfast having a relatively low level of crime, many police prosecutions were seen as unnecessarily intrusive into the social lives of the working class and generated considerable resentment. The number of police prosecutions halved as one attempt by the RIC leadership to address these concerns, and perhaps this might be one part of the explanation for a corresponding reduction in the numbers charged with assaulting a police officer (chapter 3). Yet over the timeframe examined by Radford, probably the most significant event was the 1886 riots during which 32 people were killed, including 24 by police rifle-fire (p. 101). Despite the grave challenges the RIC faced in trying to maintain order when faced with large rioting crowds, the force was severely criticized in terms of leadership, tactics and discipline. Such events would continue to loom over police-public relations, and concerns over morale, effectiveness and public legitimacy were a persistent feature of commentary on the RIC in Belfast as political tensions mounted in the early 1900s.
- 6 Radford's conclusion on the ability of the RIC to provide an appropriate and effective policing service for Belfast is sobering: "The skills required to provide a civil community-based service were entirely different from those needed to suppress a riot,

yet the RIC had to provide both of these skills in Belfast simultaneously... Despite evidence of a grudging use and acceptance of the force, the RIC could not be described as popular and its status within Belfast did not carry with it the same connotations of respectability and affection that were accorded elsewhere. However, given the sectarian divisions in Belfast, it was probably beyond the capacity of any contemporary force to be perceived as both popular and impartial.” (p. 170)

- 7 The political context of policing is a key point of engagement throughout the book. At the very outset, Radford takes issue with the argument promoted by some researchers that the RIC was, in effect, a political police force. “As recently as 2000”, he writes, “the myth that the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) was a completely semi-military police force foisted upon the hapless Irish population by the colonizing English was still being advocated” (p. 1). Here, perhaps, “completely” is the operative word. Radford draws on the “domestication” thesis advanced by Elizabeth Malcolm and colleagues in several influential publications, which argues that the RIC became progressively less militarized and more legitimate in the eyes of the general population through the 1800s. At one level, Radford’s argument clearly supports that approach, and one of the real strengths of the book is to highlight the significance of local contexts in shaping the complexion of policing and relations between police and public. At another level though, I felt that Radford rather skirted around direct engagement with the issue of the role of the police in contested settings. Ironically, given the book’s focus on the policing of a deeply divided city structured around competing identities and political allegiances, the focus upon communities unwilling or unable “to work out their differences” (p. 172) seems to omit consideration of the wider political environment in which the police operated. In defense of Radford, his focus is very much on the local political dynamics of policing in the city, rather than a more macro-level analysis of the politics of policing.
- 8 On a minor point, the flow of the argument would be enhanced with chapter titles that were less opaque and with sub-headings to provide greater direction for the reader. Given the heavy emphasis on key personalities through the study, a glossary of the key historical figures and an organizational chart of the RIC would also be useful.
- 9 Overall, this is a very engaging and well-researched study of policing during this era, highlighting the tensions in applying different policing models and structures to different socio-political environments. It is a welcome and valuable addition to the literature on the historical development of policing in Ireland.

AUTHORS

AOGÁN MULCAHY

University College Dublin
aogan.mulcahy[at]ucd.ie