

BOOK REVIEW

*Dean Wilson*¹

Vicky Conway, *Policing Twentieth Century Ireland: A History of An Garda Síochána*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2014. 280 pp. hardback. ISBN 978-0-415-69194-9

Vicky Conway's new monograph *Policing Twentieth Century Ireland* is a welcome addition to the history of policing, which has long been dominated both by the nineteenth century and Anglo-American historiography. It is all the more fascinating, as nineteenth century policing in Ireland, particularly the role of the Royal Irish Constabulary, served as a template for policing in the British colonies. Nevertheless, while there are now well developed historiographies of post-colonial policing in many other jurisdictions, the post-independence policing of the Republic of Ireland had until now only been scantily examined. Conway succinctly outlines the ways in which policing in Ireland has been 'simultaneously colonial and post-colonial' (p.209). Her argument, in essence, is that despite the widespread loathing of the Royal Irish Constabulary many fundamentals of its organisation and structure were retained upon independence, and the legacies of the RIC's highly centralised and politicized form of policing continue to reverberate through Irish policing today. It is indeed this historical legacy which, she argues, must be used to explain serious deficits in accountability in the present.

Policing Twentieth Century Ireland is structured chronologically, with the reader introduced to the evolution of Irish policing up to the present day. It commences with a deftly concise summation of the fairly well-known history of the RIC and the Dublin Metropolitan Police. There are some fascinating aspects of the immediate pre-independence period presented here, including a social boycott in which undertakers refused to handle policemen's bodies and girls who dated policemen had their hair cut off. Nevertheless, regardless of the hatred felt towards the RIC, chapter two outlines how the RIC continued to cast a long shadow over Irish policing. While Conway notes the significant achievement of establishing a police force in the newly independent Ireland within a short space of time, this achievement was nevertheless built upon shaky foundations. Policing in an independent Irish state was political from birth, indelibly intertwined with a post-colonial nationalist project. Despite its intertwining with the state-building enterprise, many legacies from the colonial period remained. The new Civic Guard was highly centralised with little local involvement, had little democratic accountability, and, perhaps most problematically, came to incorporate state security within policing in the form of the Special Branch. Conway argues that many of the

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features of the RIC were retained, and the endeavours of the new state to distinguish the new force from the old were largely based upon 'image and rhetoric' (p.45). This is a fascinating theme that Conway continues to develop throughout the book.

Chapter four introduces some of the rich oral history conducted by Conway, which included 42 interviews with retired police officers from a range of ranks and locations. This chapter delves more than the preceding ones into the quotidian lives of police officers through their own words. These personal accounts detail frustrations and developments in policing that will be more familiar to scholars of policing history in other countries. While politicians exalted the gardaí, and continued to defend them against criticism, they did little to improve wages and conditions. Nevertheless, police work in the 1950s and 60s was predominantly administrative, something which was to change sharply in the 1970s, 80s and 90s as the Troubles across the northern border spilled over into the experiences of the Garda. If events north of the border influenced routine policing, Conway demonstrates in chapter six that they also had a significantly malign impact in terms of justifying the increasing use of violence by the Special Branch, the division most focused on policing the IRA. This is a riveting, though bleak, account based on interview evidence (along with other sources) that exposes a Special Branch in which cultures of violence were not only cultivated but also actively encouraged through promotions and expansive legislation. Moreover, Conway suggests, this fuelled a culture of impunity and entrenched police attitudes towards accountability and violence that continue to undermine democratic policing in Ireland.

If it is perhaps tempting to assign transformations in Irish policing purely to the Troubles, Conway provides a very informative chapter that positions the development of Irish policing against the wider canvass of a shifting Irish society. Chapter seven examines a number of significant changes, including the role of women in the Garda, the declining social and political centrality of the Catholic Church, and the formation of the Garda Síochána Complaints Board. In this chapter, Conway is particularly interested in one seeming paradox within Irish society and policing – while many previously esteemed Irish social institutions and values were greatly diminished by social change, trust in the Garda remained (and remains) high. Despite various revelations of police misconduct and abuse of powers, surveys continue to show confidence in police in Ireland topping the European polls. Conway offers a number of possible explanations, including the structural position of those often subject to police abuses of power, the oft recycled 'bad apples' theory of police misconduct, fears for the stability of the state brought about by the Troubles, and the enduring and politically reinforced imagery of the Garda as unblemished guardians of the Irish people. The

last substantive chapter moves to the present day, examining proposals for police reform that followed scandal and investigation in the form of the Morris Tribunal.

In *Policing Twentieth Century Ireland*, Conway makes a strong argument for the separation of police from political influence and control, and for the importance of independent oversight and accountability in policing. These arguments are well made, but I remain more sceptical than the author regarding the transformative potential of accountability and oversight. Nevertheless, these are minor quibbles over where the weight of argument is placed, and with how policing should be reformed. Overall, this is an excellent addition to the policing literature which should be required reading for sociologists, criminologists and historians of policing. It is very well written with impeccable research combining documentary and oral evidence. Conway has read widely across both the history and sociology of policing, and brings a compelling analytical and theoretical framework to bear on the history of Irish policing. I would strongly recommend that all scholars with an interest in policing, and particularly those with an interest in post-conflict and post-colonial policing, read *Policing in Twentieth Century Ireland*. It is a salutary lesson in how the past continues to inform the present, often for the worse.