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**John Merriman**, *Police Stories: Building the French State 1815-1851*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006. viii + 254 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography and index. £33 UK; \$55.00 US (hb). ISBN 0-19-507253-7.

Review by Paul Lawrence, The Open University (UK).

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In researching *Police Stories*, a fascinating glimpse into the world of the *commissaires de police* during the first half of the nineteenth century, John Merriman has visited over seventy departmental archives. This vast undertaking has resulted in a rich collage of interwoven testimony in which the varied lives and voices of the men themselves shine clearly through. That said, the subtitle of the book (*'Building the French State'*) is also significant. This is much more than simply a book about the police, policing, and crime. Rather, it addresses many wider themes, including the way in which the French state was knitted together during the nineteenth century, the mechanics of urban governance and the nature of daily life in French provincial towns. Through a detailed consideration of the *commissaires* — who they were, what they did and, importantly, who controlled them — Merriman argues that this increasingly professional institution contributed significantly to the establishment of a more orderly, centralized France. The book can be roughly divided into two halves. Broadly speaking, the first three chapters consider the police themselves and the second three chapters consider the practise of policing. The final chapter and the conclusion then return to the important issue of who controlled the police, and the significance of this control for the functioning of the state.

Napoleon regarded the reorganization of the police as one of the "several blocks of granite: that would form the base of his regime (p. 16). Prefectorial supervision of policing was established in 1800 (via the law of 28 pluviôse, year 8), which also made the appointment of a *commissaire de police* (CP) mandatory in any town with more than five thousand inhabitants. In principle, another post was to be created for every additional ten thousand inhabitants and supplementary *agents* or *gardes-de-ville* could also be appointed. Although modest by current standards (a very rough calculation gives a figure of one police officer per 300 head of population in contemporary France), this new system was the subject of much debate.[1] Salaries varied widely according to the prestige of the posting, but Merriman asserts that "the vast majority of *commissaires* were drawn from the lower middle classes" (p. 38). This finding certainly indicates that policing was a far more prestigious profession than it was (for example) in England at the time [2]. *Commissaires* were aged twenty-five to forty-five on appointment, and prior work in "literate" professions and the military was common.

Whether or not CPs should serve in their own locality was a topic of hot debate. Obviously, language was an issue given the complexities of Provençal, Langedocien patois and Savoyard. Over the period under consideration, however, Merriman traces an increasing shift towards outside appointments, demonstrating (he argues) that the centralizing state was increasingly winning out over local interests. Some

*commissaires* had long terms of service in the same town, but as a general rule “five years was a lengthy tenure in one place” (p. 55). The varied duties of the police amply demonstrate the all-purpose role they played in the administration of the French state. Merriman refers to one busy officer in the western district of Tours who handed out 568 passports (and stamped another 2,154) during a seven month period in 1831. In the same year, he also distributed 663 *cartes de sûreté*, dealt with ninety-nine cases of noise, investigated thirty frauds, ten incidents involving prostitutes, eighty-six thefts, eleven sudden deaths, twenty-three complaints about bakers and thirty-four cases of obstruction. In addition to all this, he received 341 complaints, handed out forty-eight certificates of indigence, eighty-three *certificats de bonne vie*, provided information on 178 different occasions and drew up various procès-verbaux. That said, the source for this was the CP’s own monthly reports — a source which Merriman on occasion (although not in this instance) has a tendency to employ rather uncritically.

The link between the police and politics forms a bridge between the discussion of the police themselves and the consideration of policing. Chapter three provides an interesting assessment of the reasons for which *commissaires* were removed from their posts. As Merriman neatly puts it, there was generally a shift from “purges to dismissals” over the period (p. 66). For him, the Restoration was the key period when political allegiance became no longer sufficient to guarantee employment as a police officer. While politics was still a significant factor in the hiring and firing of officers, particularly in 1830 and 1848, of course, other factors such as levels of literacy and the taint of corruption came to the fore in dismissals. Chapter four then goes on to consider the policing of protest and dissent. Here the links between politics and the police were abundantly obvious at times. As a police official asked rhetorically in 1814 “without the ministry of police, how would one know the movement of society, its needs, its deviations, the state of opinion, the errors and the factions which agitate minds?” (p. 9).

Strikes were illegal until 1864 so the *commissaires* were heavily involved in activities such as preventing coalitions of workers meeting to petition for higher wages. However, Merriman’s analysis is subtle enough to show that *commissaires* were not simply the will of the state imposed locally. Discretion very often enabled a well-known local officer to act as a conciliatory presence during periods of unrest and agitation. Moreover, Merriman shows just how much police work was extremely mundane, pertaining instead to the regulation of travel, the markets, the *octroi* and ensuring that the roads were clear. In this way, although Merriman’s *commissaires* can be recognised as “domestic missionaries”, imposing new forms of order on the unruly working classes, *Police Stories* also provides a useful corrective to any notion of the nineteenth century as a period during which the police acted solely as mechanism to “discipline and punish” the newly-emergent working classes.[3]

The book’s final chapter is one of its most revealing. It considers the tensions between mayors and prefects over the exact role of the *commissaires*. The municipalities were compelled by law to pay their salaries, so the mayors wanted local men with local priorities. However, the *commissaires* were appointed and administered by the prefects, who were naturally more concerned with national matters, and in particular with matters of “haute” police. This rivalry was, Merriman asserts, “frequent, bitter and revealing” (p. 170). Taking Lyon as a detailed example, he argues that, by mid-century, the battle for control had effectively been won by the state — even if “the balance of power between the state and the municipality would tilt back and forth in the early Third Republic” (p. 187).

Overall, the nature of the material which Merriman has collated is fascinating. A lot of pertinent detail is presented. However, in discussing his approach, the author himself notes "I often leave it to the *commissaires* to speak for themselves [...] They would have insisted on this" (p. 13). The question might be posed as to whether, at times, a stronger authorial voice and a more detailed engagement with existing secondary literature might have strengthened the work a little. For example, the point is made forcefully that the police were one mechanism through which the central state came to extend its influence into the provinces. The debate over the timing of this process has a long pedigree. Merriman does mention Eugen Weber's *Peasants into Frenchmen* very briefly on a single point (p. 119) but it might have been interesting to link this new material to wider, more recent debates about the "drawing together" of the French nation such as those provided by, inter alia, Peter Sahlins, Caroline Ford and Timothy Baycroft.[4]

Moreover, while Merriman does engage with the work of some specialist police historians (such as Clive Emsley and Marie Vogel), more interaction with other such authors might also have helped to draw out the wider implications of the work. For example, one of the main themes of Jean-Noël Luc's authoritative work on the gendarmerie during the nineteenth century is their role in the drawing together of the French state.[5] Some engagement with work of this type and a comparison of the role of the *commissaires* with other elements of the police would undoubtedly have been fruitful.

As with any publication, there are also a few presentational issues. Some, such as the curiously small font size (which will make reading tiring work for all but the most eagle-eyed) are beyond the control of the author. Others are perhaps not — such as the practice of giving translations for some, but not all, of the French quoted. That aside, this is an excellent addition to the growing number of works on the criminal justice history of Europe.[6] Moreover, *Police Stories* will also be of immense interest to historians of nineteenth-century France from a wide range of fields, covering as it does ground germane to the study of governance, the professions, urban development and daily life in general.

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## NOTES

[1] *European Sourcebook of Crime and Criminal Justice Statistics*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition (The Hague: WODC, 2006), p. 24.

[2] Haia Shpayer-Makov, *The Making of a Policeman* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002).

[3] Robert D. Storch, 'The Policeman as Domestic Missionary', *Journal of Social History* 9:4 (1976): 481-509.

[4] Peter Sahlins, *Boundaries: The Making of France and Spain in the Pyrenees* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); Caroline Ford, *Creating the Nation in Provincial France: Religion and Political Identity in Brittany* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993); Timothy Baycroft, *Culture, Identity and Nationalism: French Flanders in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2004).

[5] Jean-Noël Luc, *Gendarmerie, État et Société aux XIXe Siècle* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2002).

[6] See, most recently, Clive Emsley's *Crime, Police and Penal Policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

Paul Lawrence  
The Open University  
[p.m.lawrence@open.ac.uk](mailto:p.m.lawrence@open.ac.uk)