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Nothin' to do but walk up and down?

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The Irish Policeman, 1822–1922: A Life
Elizabeth Malcolm
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'Nothin' to do but walk up and down,' continued Joe Sproul, recalling his early dreams. 'Your boots shinin' an' the heels soundin' on the curb-stone. Pintin' your baton to a dung-heap an' saying "Take that out o' that," and findin' it gone when you'd come again. Comin' to a row when 'twould be over, an' runnin' the fellow in that you'd know 'ud go quiet. Keepin' your cap on in the courthouse, and calling "Silence" whenever you'd like. Standin' at the corner with a little varnished cane in your hand admired by the young women, gentle an' simple; goin' occasionally to a dance in colored clothes, an' givin' sixpence to the fiddler.'

So complained Constable Sproul in the Fenian Charles Kickham's novel *For the Old Land: A Tale of Twenty Years Ago …* (1886). Sproul had expected much more. His mother's cousin, the head constable, had promised his father that if his son joined the Royal Irish Constabulary he would lead a 'gentleman's' life. Instead, we come upon him driving three pigs out of a ploughed field, his partner on the beat, Acting-Constable Finucane, looking down 'at his high-heeled stylish boots, plastered all over with clay and mud'. Sproul's predicament, gently lampooned by Kickham, parallels many of the themes of Elizabeth Malcolm's elegantly written collective biography of RIC men over their force's century-long existence.

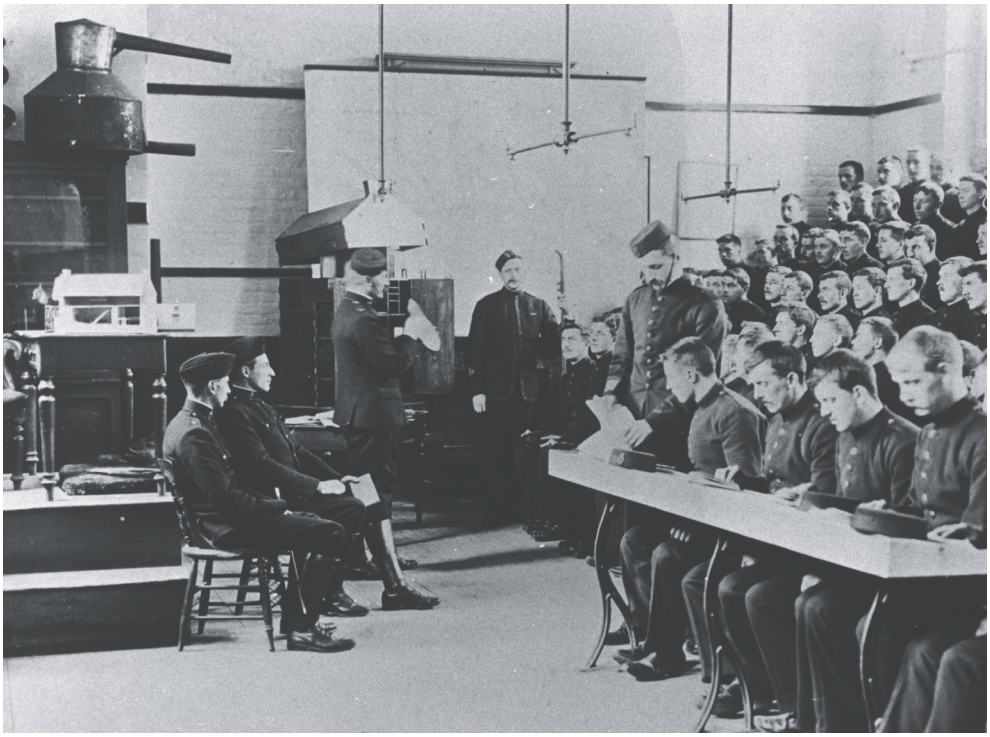
Malcolm's portrait makes clear that chasing pigs out of a field was at odds with the social aspirations that propelled young Irish men into the force, but as Sproul's complaints suggest, the constable's social status was unstable. One moment an admired figure in the neighbourhood, the next the orderly in the courtroom, or chasing pigs. Numerically Catholics dominated the force, comprising some 69 per cent of the total in the 1840s and 79 per cent in the 1900s, and for a healthy, well-built, intelligent son of an Irish farmer, a career in the RIC was an attractive proposition. It guaranteed accommodation, a reliable income and, increasingly, a decent pension, a very valuable commodity. Joining the RIC also kept these men and their families in Ireland, though service did demand a form of internal migration. With the exception of Belfast, County Antrim, where different rules pertained, no man was allowed to serve in his home county, and on marriage, he, along with his wife, was liable to be transferred again. Marriage itself was judged a privilege rather than a right, and the restrictions imposed on their right to marry, besides pension rights and questions regarding pay, were among the Irish policeman's perennial complaints.

Dublin Metropolitan Police constable, Eden Quay, Dublin, *c.* 1900. Photograph: J. J. Clarke/ National Library of Ireland.

Measuring recruits, the Depot, Phoenix Park, Dublin, *c.* 1900. Photograph: courtesy of Jim Herlihy.

Protestants, however, dominated the officer class, accounting for around two-thirds of the cohort, and they were fiercely protective of the privileges associated with their status. In particular, they resisted promotion from the ranks and Malcolm has found in the social politics of the RIC a further example of the way class sensibilities and religious identities often overlapped in nineteenth-century Ireland. Officers, whose world was that of the Big House and the hunt, did not wish to be demeaned by the idea that their position could be achieved through hard work and long service; for them, their professional rank was a mark of gentility. And though promotion from the rank and file became more common as the professional expectations of high-flying career policemen advanced and as the culture of the force became less military and more civilian, entry into the officer class did not see former constables welcomed into the county sets. Instead, they found themselves socially isolated, ostracized by their professional equals but social superiors, and newly distanced from their old comrades.

Sproul's complaint that the duties of the policeman were dull, largely confined to the beat, contained a great deal of truth. Rural police duties were monotonous and often arduous, sometimes severely affecting the policeman's health. Tramping across fields in all weathers hoping to catch illegal distillers at work or lying in ditches to keep watch for local ne'er-do-wells, added little to the appeal of the beat. In effect, policemen were always on duty and, if not physically incapacitated, they were expected to remain available for emergency service even after retirement. During their professional lives, they generally lived in cramped conditions in barracks, which were usually converted townhouses, and their families had to adhere to strict rules of behaviour, which wives found highly intrusive. To marry an RIC man was to accept the institutionalization of much of your family life. Though policemen were rarely permitted to dress other than in their dark and sombre uniforms, during their occasional moments of levity, such as at a dance, there were social obligations — tipping the fiddler, perhaps — which many policemen could ill-afford.



RIC recruits in class, the Depot, Phoenix Park, Dublin, *c.* 1900. Photograph: courtesy of Jim Herlihy.

When not in the company of his colleagues, levity did not always come easily to the RIC man. The constables and their officers were put through a rigorous — though separate — training régime that moulded, as one policeman put it, 'the country boy into a stern, suspicious policeman'. This demeanour was an essential part of the RIC man's armour, distancing him from the members of the community in his care. It was the product of the military-style atmosphere and regulations that governed his compulsory six months' training at the Depot in the Phoenix Park, Dublin. The men slept in barracks, sixteen to a room; attended lessons in reading, writing and accounting, improving what was in theory already good literacy and numeracy; and, above all, they were instructed in drill, a constant feature of life at the Depot. Malcolm points out the significance of the patent leather stock, the first piece of uniform all new recruits were expected to acquire: 3.5 inches wide, this very stiff and hard leather collar was fastened round the neck with a buckle and strap. The RIC man's head was always to be held aloft, a symbol of his physical, mental and moral superiority. Significant as this Foucauldian disciplining of the body was, also important was the social whirl of the Depot. As Malcolm notes, the Depot was a 'total institution', and in providing the recruits their every need (except, perhaps, sex), it came to determine what those needs were.

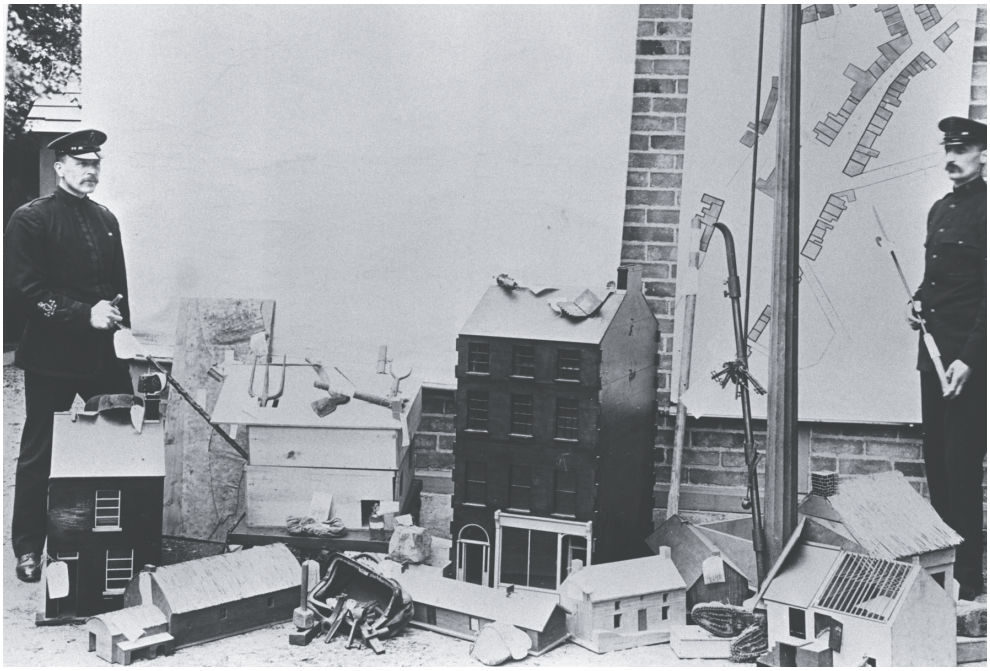
The camaraderie and caste loyalty the Depot nurtured sustained many policemen through their years of service and into retirement. This powerful sense of loyalty to their comrades and the force as a whole, Malcolm persuasively argues, did not necessarily coincide with shared political identities. Holding moderate unionist or nationalist views was thought compatible with service in the RIC, though, with the predictable exception of the Freemasons, membership of any political organization was strictly forbidden. In marked contrast to its successor organization in Northern

Ireland (the Royal Ulster Constabulary), the RIC regarded the Orange Order with particular suspicion. Conversely, Malcolm observes that unionists viewed the RIC with suspicion, regarding it as a Trojan horse for the advancement of Irish Catholics at the behest of an increasingly green Dublin Castle: for northern Unionists in particular, it intimated what a Home Rule Ireland would be like, a place in which Dublin's tentacles would increasingly penetrate society and culture.

As Sproul implied, there were times when the exercise of state power seemed superfluous, the exercise of bureaucratic niceties of little practical value. Few of the certainties of the Dublin parade ground were to be found in provincial Ireland and the real tasks of policing were learnt on the job. Moreover, attempts to exercise that authority often ran the danger of revealing the RIC's vulnerability. Although there was one policeman for every 791 people in Ireland in 1842, as opposed to only one for every 1,611 in England, when faced with faction fights or mass protests, the few police officers stationed in any single country district were often little more than bystanders dependent on army reinforcements, if and when they were deployed.

Day-to-day, the RIC's tasks rarely concerned the political events familiar from the histories of nationalist, agrarian, or Orange agitations, and when not upholding the law and endeavouring to maintain order, they functioned more generally as an 'all-purpose government agency', arguably becoming the most significant state institution in nineteenth-century Ireland. With a command structure centralized at Dublin Castle and

Police attending at the eviction of Michael Connell, Moyasta, Co. Clare, 1888. Photograph: National Library of Ireland, Lawrence Collection (Royal).



Items from the Museum of Crime in the Depot, Phoenix Park, Dublin, *c.* 1900. Photograph: courtesy of Jim Herlihy.

under the control of the chief secretary and the lord lieutenant, Irish policing was of a different hue to that of England and Wales, where it came under the control of partially democratic local government. As Malcolm observes, these differences are often seen as evidence of the colonial nature of the Irish government and many historians of British policing throughout the Empire have argued that the RIC provided a pioneering model. Following Friedrich Engels, Malcolm suggests another model, noting that, as an armed force controlled by central government, the RIC might be more helpfully compared to continental police forces. Rather than showing evidence of a British genius for oppressive innovation, the government, in creating the RIC, was aping continental practices long held to be necessary by centralizing states that could not rely on the loyalty of their citizens. Indeed, in the early 1880s when the awkwardly named Crime Branch Special was established within the RIC to combat advanced nationalist conspiracies like the Invincibles, British critics feared it would open the doors to 'continental abuses', creating an unaccountable, invisible force that would do the bidding of unscrupulous political masters. Similar arguments were made at the time of the Dublin Police Act (1786) and when Robert Peel guided his Peace Preservation (Ireland) Act (1814), and the Constabulary (Ireland) Act (1822) through parliament: such forces were thought to be at odds with English ideas of liberty.

Nonetheless, the development of the RIC highlighted the extent to which the cultural and social ties, the systems of deference, which sustained the peculiar British system of government elsewhere in the Union, were too weak to be a source of stability in Ireland. The Irish élites did not have the authority to maintain peace and stability along the localized lines that pertained in England, Wales and Scotland, a system that, according to an idealized Tory discourse, had created a Britain that did not need to be governed. Irish differences, according to the same discourse, required a statist solution — that is, centralized policing under the direct control of the government. The command structures of the RIC — and

Dublin Castle more generally — reflected the lack of faith Westminster had in the Irish gentry as much as it did the strength of Irish Catholic disaffection.

Conscious of the failings of the Irish élite, Dublin Castle developed an almost paranoid appetite for information about what was going on in provincial Ireland. The RIC came to be depended upon as the government's eyes and ears, providing, county by county, monthly reports on local events, the economy and agricultural prospects. These reports were highly repetitive and formulaic, and although they contain valuable information on political activity of all hues, the bulk of this vast corpus of material is distinctly mundane, as any government official would have been pleased to note. It seems likely that these police reports had a sobering effect on government, often counteracting, for example, the impression of frenetic nationalist activity conveyed by the nationalist press. Indeed, successive chief secretaries, when facing tough questioning in the House of Commons, relied on the RIC to provide the evidence needed to combat lurid questions regarding the state of Ireland, questions that were often of an anti-Irish or sectarian bent. Like any evidence, police records need careful handling, but it should be borne in mind, when faced with the uneventfulness of much Irish policing, that no government agency, chasing finite resources, would intentionally play down the significance of its role.

Under the Union, Ireland's lot was not a happy one and Malcolm's analysis of moments of tension within the force provide a new lens on the difficulties faced by those attempting to govern Ireland. In each of the flashpoints she identifies, RIC discontent coincided with political unrest. The late 1860s saw a falling off in rates of recruitment, increased resignations, and a detectable restlessness in the force. 'Fenian fever' had placed added burdens on the police and constables felt they were not being adequately rewarded for their work during this period of rising prosperity and prices. Similar grievances led to the Limerick 'mutiny' of 1882, which Malcolm rightly prefers to call an 'agitation'. Again, discontent followed a period of sustained political unrest, which had seen policemen form the front line in the conflict between landlord and tenant, forcing them into the unenviable position as the 'body-servants of privilege and property'. Petitioning-RIC men attracted a great deal of sympathy, not least because their demands primarily concerned working conditions and pensions, revealing their desire for a lifestyle less confined by the regulations and routine of the barracks. The chief secretary's insistence that 'submission should precede redress' was met and the 1880s saw a gradual liberalization of the RIC régime and improvement in pay and pension rights. Similar unrest surfaced in Belfast in early 1907, where the cost of living was high and the job particularly tough. Although Belfast RIC men enjoyed certain privileges, they were aggrieved that their working conditions did not meet the higher standards that were the norm for the men of the Dublin Metropolitan Police, a separate force. Although they couched their demands in the language of loyalty, their claims were dismissed, the ringleaders sacked, and many men were transferred out of the city. Each of these flashpoints, Malcolm argues, was remarkable less for its rebellious character than for the loyalty to the service that it revealed. Profoundly discontented policemen often chose to leave both the force and the country, choosing emigration over a sustained conflict with their superiors or the government.

How, then, can the RIC man be classified? Was he the servant of the government, of the people, or of an oppressive colonial régime? In Malcolm's sympathetic collective portrait he was something of all three. Malcolm appears neither to subscribe to Albert Memmi's view, which is quoted,

that policemen in colonial situations form a category of the colonized which attempts to escape from its political and social oppression by adopting the ideology of the colonizer, nor to wholly accept the pertinence of Franz Fanon's view, also quoted, that in 'colonial countries the agents of the government speak the language of pure force'. What is clear is that Malcolm rejects P. S. O'Hegarty's demonization of the RIC as a 'Janissary force' comprised of men who 'bullied, terrorized, and when ordered, murdered their own people without compunction for nearly a hundred years'.

The notion that the men of the force were unchanging agents of government tyranny, the quislings of the British state in Ireland, must be modified. Naturally enough, many Catholics were grateful for the protection the force, as an agent of the law, accorded, and it is not difficult to imagine, had the Home Rule campaign succeeded, the RIC evolving into a force broadly acceptable to the majority of Irish Catholics. By contrast, to take but one example, during the 1890s when Protestant evangelists took to preaching in southern Irish towns, unionist opinion was highly critical of the RIC for moving the preachers on, rather than protecting their freedom of speech as British subjects. At such moments the RIC were caught between two highly vocal populations, each acutely conscious of their rights and dignity: a place differently liminal to that between the British state and the Irish people. For although nationalist polemic identified Dublin Castle as the quintessential symbol of oppressive government in Ireland, the RIC only featured in such discourse during periods of agrarian agitation or distress. That is, of course, until the force became a target during the Irish War of Independence (1919–21), a watershed in the force's history. And although the RIC's record before the revolution should not be sanitized, popular nationalist perceptions of the force were transformed by the logic of the revolutionary war waged by the IRA, which identified the agents of the British state as their enemy; 600 RIC men died as a direct result of the conflict.

This logic has become a mainstay of cinematic portrayals of the conflict, as in Ken Loach's highly problematic *The Wind that Shakes the Barley* (2006). Loach has RIC men warned that continued service in the pay of the British will make them a legitimate target. With equal polemical effect, Peter Hart set the tone of his brilliant but contentious *The IRA and Its Enemies* (1998) by opening with a detailed description of the IRA's assassination of an RIC man, Sergeant O'Donoghue. Sympathetically portrayed by Hart as a family man and pillar of his community, O'Donoghue's fate demonstrates how revolutionary logic transformed the RIC man from being a person who could be judged by the community on the basis of his individual merit, to a symbol. The same shift in the categorization of the RIC is traced in Sebastian Barry's novel *The Whereabouts of Eneas McNulty* (1998). Barry tells of the fate of the innocent fool of the novel's title who returns from service in the British army in 1918 and in exchanging his army uniform for an RIC uniform fails to recognize the transformation that has taken place in Ireland. The Sligo IRA forbids him from setting foot in Ireland ever again, an injunction they sustain throughout McNulty's life, and so his wanderings begin. Few RIC men suffered so severely, but as Malcolm shows in this fine study, for the great majority of RIC men who did survive the revolutionary conflict, service in the RIC left a very mixed legacy. For Catholic families, often with a cross-generational history of service in various police forces, having had a brother, a father or a grandfather in the RIC could be at once a dirty secret and a source of pride. ■