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Georgina Sinclair, *At the end of the line: Colonial policing and the imperial endgame, 1945-80*

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Clive Emsley



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- 1 The police have many tasks; different contexts bring different tasks to the foreground. During the nineteenth century, when modern, bureaucratic police institutions were established across Europe, the police in Britain were able to avoid much in the way of political surveillance and repression. At the same time, British – or more specifically English – notions of individual freedom and state power led to the creation of a police force that was ostentatiously civilian and rarely carried lethal weaponry. This prompted assertions about the unique nature of British police and boasts of it being ‘the best in the world’ primarily because of this civilian, non-political nature. As Britain disengaged from empire in the years after the Second World War, politicians and civil servants in London aspired to leaving a legacy of such civilian policing in the former colonies. This aspiration, and the problems that it faced because of the varying situations on the ground, is the subject of Georgina Sinclair’s book.
- 2 The English/British model of policing had a theoretical appeal during the nineteenth century, though the need to establish and maintain imperial authority meant that beyond the white dominions especially, colonial police administrators tended to look to the police system established for Ireland. When the Royal Irish Constabulary was abolished on the partition of Ireland and the creation of the Irish Free State, some

colonial police officers continued to be trained by the Royal Ulster Constabulary in Northern Ireland, still part of the territories of the British Crown. At the same time many former RIC men moved to new postings in the empire and, particularly, in the mandate territory of Palestine. During the troubles of the inter-war period and the violence that immediately preceded the declaration of the independent state of Israel the British police in Palestine developed their military and political capabilities. At the same time some murkier aspects of counter-insurgency policing were tried such as the under-cover pseudo gangs who tracked down insurgents. After 1948 the men involved in each of these developments were instructed to take their expertise to confront the different forms of agitation and disorder in the colonies that heralded the end of empire.

- 3 The various colonies of the British Empire had developed different forms of policing. The creation of a Colonial Police service in 1936 to enhance the prestige of the job and to improve efficiency and the prospects of serving officers had little immediate effect and was rapidly sidelined by world war. Post-war problems within the various colonies were all different; there were serious 'emergencies' in Cyprus, Kenya and Malaya, but elsewhere the trouble ranged from nationalist agitation, sometimes violent, to trades union activism, suspected of being communist inspired. In Hong Kong, at times, the Chinese Cultural Revolution appeared to threaten military assistance to communist insurgents and shots were exchanged across the border. But it was precisely at the time when, under different pressures, the empire was giving way to independent states that the Colonial Office in London was seeking to develop its Colonial Police Service into a one-size-fits-all, based on the idealised British model, that would leave a British policing legacy.
- 4 Sinclair's research has been prodigious. In addition to government files she has tracked down some 400 former colonial police officers, administrators and army officers. Some she has interviewed; some have given her access to their family papers. Interviews with thirty-five men form an important strand of personal involvement and observation running through the book. In the text she ranges with ease across the different colonies and their contrasting experiences. The story of political aspirations foundering on the rocks of political realities might be predictable, but no single author has attempted to look at these issues comparatively before; and, as Sinclair notes in her conclusion, it was not a story of complete failure. In some places some European police officers stayed on after independence to serve in the police institutions of the new states and many of the new states aspired to developing something along the lines of the British model. There is another volume to be written on that part of the story and, on the evidence of this illuminating volume, Sinclair is well placed to do it. Similarly there is another volume to be written on the impact that the policing of decolonisation had on the policing of the metropole. Men with experience of pursuing and watching those considered 'communists' and 'trouble makers' in the colonies sometimes returned to police jobs in Britain. Several commentators have noted that the Association of Chief Police Officers for England and Wales was given details of the riot control methods deployed successfully by the Royal Hong Kong Police. The traffic in policing models has never been one-way and again there are important issues indicated in this stimulating book that need to be explored further.

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