

8 The Colony Within

I sometimes think that if I'd done something terribly wrong the rubber-stamp would have endorsed it. That's the danger. It's a controlling force without the ability to judge.

District Superintendent Ronald Merrick on the Indian Police in *The Raj Quartet* by Paul Scott

The history of Britain's colonial police force is sometimes told with a tinge of romance. Nowadays, if it is told at all, it tends to be in the fond drone of reminiscence by men who are comfortably returned to the safety of the home counties, mixing the first gins of the evening as their retirement clocks chime six. The tales take a familiar range of topics – excitable natives forever plotting against the Crown; mass rallies whipped up by fiery demagogues; sanity restored only by the relentless cool of men in khaki shorts cracking a few well-chosen heads; ringleaders thrown into gaol; new waves of plotters going underground to prepare the next show. The best of these stories could happily serve in the long-running radio series *A Book at Bedtime*, and have, indeed, been both edited and rehearsed with considerable care over the many years of their re-telling. Outside this small and diminishing world, the importance of the real legacy of colonial policing is only now becoming apparent. It is, in an unforeseen way, the key to British mainland policing in the latter years of the 20th century.

The two British police traditions of the past century and a half were never intended to be mixed together. One was for use at home, the other for export. They embodied different styles, different technologies and, most important of all, different attitudes toward the populations they policed. Policing at home in mainland Britain was to be as gentle as possible among citizens who were (at least) the political equals of their constables. The consent of the people was the very foundation of the constabulary. Overseas, on the other hand, none of these considerations applied. The populations concerned were not British citizens but 'natives' who could be treated with whatever degree of force was required to do the job. The job itself was control and, where necessary, repression. The idea of seeking the consent of the local people simply never arose.

These two traditions are separate no longer. They have been brought together in an extraordinary historical circle which stretches over a hundred and fifty years. It began with the creation of a police force for London in 1830, and continued through the establishment of a unified paramilitary constabulary to police Ireland in 1836. Then on through the policing expansion of the nineteenth century, as force after force was set up to take care of different parts of the empire, all of them based on the Irish model and trained in Dublin. For a century they carried on their business of policing the colonies, which other forces modelled on the Metropolitan Police proliferated throughout mainland Britain. Then, after the Second World War, these two traditions slowly started to mingle. In 1981, they began a formal relationship involving regular meetings, the institutional equivalent of going steady. In 1983, ACPO arranged a marriage and in 1984 it bore fruit when the first colonial police tactics were ordered for use against the citizens of mainland Britain. The long courtship was complete.

Those involved in the early stages of policy-making had no idea that the story would end as it has. They intended no such marriage. When Whitehall established two major police forces in the 1830s, they were meant for quite separate purposes. The Metropolitan Police were created under the Home Office to replace the militias as law-enforcers and keepers of the peace in the nation's capital, and what became the Royal Irish Constabulary was set up as a merger of four provincial military commands in Dublin to put down rebellions by Irish republicans. One force, the Peelers, was for domestic use among a population whose consent to their authority could be won. The other was tailored for action across the water, among a divided population which was in armed conflict over the very issue of Whitehall's authority

to govern it. The tactics of the two forces were quite different from the start – the unarmed citizen constables of Georgian London would have been fatally vulnerable in Dublin, while the armed patrols of the RIC would have represented a mere continuation of the military if they had been seen in mainland Britain. There was a clear difference of outlook which stemmed from their different purposes. An officer in the Metropolitan force might face real danger in the backstreets of his beat and earn the undying resentment of those he arrested and gave evidence against, but he could rest his general approach to the public on the understanding that most of London was behind him. Even some of the felons who were busy breaking the rules would accept the legitimacy of the whole game. Not so, of course, in Ireland. An officer of the RIC, in contrast, could face outright enmity from local residents who not only resented his intrusion into their affairs but also denied the very authority of his uniform.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, Whitehall needed officers for the new police forces which were set up to keep order in the empire. It also needed a style and structure for these colonial police forces, and found that it had a ready-made model in Ireland. After all, the gentleman officers of the streets of London, the imperial capital, could hardly be thought suitable for the distant lands still waiting for civilization. So for a hundred years, Ireland became the base for an enormous training operation controlled from London. Officers of the RIC were sent abroad to recruit and give basic training to police forces all over the world, and on the return trips officers who needed advanced training for promotion returned to Dublin. A few ‘native’ senior officers were signed up in the colonies, and they too made the long journey to Phoenix Park for training. When self-government finally established an Irish administration in Dublin, the RIC tradition continued in the six counties of Northern Ireland. After partition, the force, renamed the Royal Ulster Constabulary, simply carried on the same business of training colonial police officers from its new address in Belfast. Training on a large scale was transferred to mainland Britain only after the Second World War.

The rugged nature of colonial policing is not in doubt. The model developed in Ireland and then copied in British colonies around the globe was deliberately far removed from the civilian police forces which reproduced the Metropolitan Police throughout Britain.

For a concise description of its nature, the colonial police force can speak for itself in the person of Michael Macoun, who (until his retirement in 1979) was its most senior officer. After Stowe and Oxford, he joined the Tanganyika police in 1939 and then became Commissioner of the colonial force in Uganda. For the last thirteen years of his working life he was at the very top – Inspector General of Police for all the Dependent Territories and Overseas Police Adviser to the Foreign Office. Michael Macoun is an engaging and hospitable man who tends to express his views as he chain-smokes his cigarettes – both are unfiltered. His family background in Ireland (‘I am a de-tribalized Ulster Scot’) and his long experience in the colonies give him a unique qualification to define the nature of the British colonial police tradition. He calls it an armed constabulary with a limited civil police capability:

Right up to the end of the last war, training in the colonial police locally was almost entirely what one might call ‘paramilitary’ – military exercises, weapon training and drill. There was just a basis of law and police procedures, but the great emphasis was on the paramilitary side.

This concentration on paramilitary training was almost inevitable given the nature of the Royal Irish Constabulary which had trained the colonial police forces:

The composition of the Royal Irish Constabulary was largely ex-military officers in the senior ranks. The rank and file lived in barracks and the training was confined to quasi-military exercises.

My own personal experience was to arrive in East Africa having spent a year being trained by the Metropolitan Police, to find that there was barely a senior officer who’d ever had any police training at all. They’d been soldiers.

But colonial police forces were more than mere extensions of the British Army. They maintained their own proud traditions of independence from the military. An occasional Army officer might be seconded across to help with weapons training, but the police controlled their own affairs and organized their own command structure. They existed alongside the Army and were, as the dictionary says (see Part 6), intended to supplement the strictly military, while being organized along military lines. They were, and are still, paramilitary police forces.

The tactics they used, in their most sophisticated form, were developed to deal with a wave of uprisings and urban riots which swept through the colonies after the Second World War. Riot Control Units were established in many countries based on a common pattern of organization. One Inspector, one NCO and eight men formed a single unit and could be neatly transported in a single Land Rover. Riot Control Units were strategically positioned at various parts of a colony so that they could quickly be sent to put down any local disturbances. In later manifestations, these units took on a galaxy of new names: Police Field Forces, Police Motorized Companies, Police Mobile Units. But their basic organization remained the same, and their tasks were clear: to control riots in the towns and fight insurgents in the countryside.

In quieter times they were used for ceremonial and guard duties. Michael Macoun saw a dual purpose in giving them these other tasks: they were useful duties in their own right, and they also kept the troops occupied: 'It was particularly important that they should be employed on other duties. Otherwise they would get stale and discontented and possibly mutinous.'

The weapons of the Riot Control Units were initially firearms and truncheons, with little in between. They carried riot shields and developed a series of manoeuvres which could be carried out by ten men acting together to attack or arrest members of a crowd. Later, in the fifties, they got hold of tear gas and began to use it widely. Before long, their crowd control techniques came to depend on tear gas not as a last resort, but as one of their first resorts, using it even before there had been a serious outbreak of violence from the crowd. Michael Macoun set the policy:

We worked under the concept of early intervention before disturbances snowballed. The use of tear smoke was justifiable if it meant you dispersed the crowd quickly and could contain the situation. You might lose a number of arrests in the process, but it was worth dispersing them so that you could regroup and decide what to do next.

In the sixties, one colonial police force, the Royal Hong Kong Police, developed (as was noted in Part 6) a new type of intermediate weapon. Wooden sticks, like little police batons, were loaded up and fired from guns in place of live ammunition. Word of this development spread rapidly. The official report of the Commission established by President Johnson to investigate the 1967 riots in American cities recommended that the Pentagon begin research immediately into new, non-lethal, types of ammunition for use in civil disorders. It said: 'British units in Hong Kong, for example, fire a wooden peg that ... is reportedly highly effective'.

These 'non-lethal' weapons did not cause colonial police forces to put away their live firearms, though Michael Macoun claims that they continued to use them against crowds less frequently than is sometimes supposed. If they were thought necessary, they were still used:

If it were a very large crowd and the police could not persuade them to disperse with the use of tear smoke, they would be given a formal warning. A banner would be held up saying: DISPERSE OR I OPEN FIRE.

It is worth noting how closely this procedure, even down to the wording of the banner, corresponds with that adopted by ACPO in 1983 and incorporated in Section 20 of the tactical options (see Part 6).

Once a warning had been given, the colonial instructions were to open fire on the crowd aiming at knee-height. The idea of firing over their heads was rejected because it would give the impression that the firearms were ineffectual if, as one officer put it, there were no bodies squirming on the ground after the shots.

The most significant aspect of colonial policing is not its technology or its paramilitary structure. It is the habit of mind which determined the whole process of the empire. Colonial police forces were set up to keep order on behalf of the Government in Whitehall. Their relationship to the populations they police is that of master to servant, characterized by instruction on one side and obedience (coerced if necessary) on the other. Michael Macoun makes this key point rhetorically, saying that colonial policing has a different philosophical basis from British domestic policing, and was drawn from the imperial precepts of Rome:

The British domestic tradition grew from the Anglo-Saxon philosophy that the law reflected the will of the people and that every free man had an obligation to uphold it.

The function of the British police overseas was closer to the Roman tradition. It had an organized force at the disposal of the administering power to maintain public order by pragmatic action rather than worrying about accountability to the community as a whole. The authority of government could be deployed by all means at its disposal without reference to public opinion.

We had the force to maintain order, simple and straight, and if people didn't like it that was too bad.

With the benefit of hindsight, Michael Macoun now thinks that blurring of the distinction between domestic policing and its colonial counterpart started in the late forties. A formal programme of visits was set up by the Foreign Office, which involved senior British policemen touring the colonies to learn how their opposite numbers operated. For an officer sitting at his desk in Manchester or Newcastle, it must have seemed a most attractive offer. A few weeks in the sunshine without an in-tray, and with little to do except soak up the distilled operational experience of officers from another world. There was no shortage of takers.

James Anderton, then the Assistant to the Chief Inspector of Constabulary at the Home Office, was sent on a six-week fact-finding and lecture tour of Asia which included visits to Ceylon, India, the Philippines and Hong Kong. John Alderson was sent to West Africa on a shorter trip, during which he had all his belongings stolen from a beach in Sierra Leone, including his passport and money, while taking a swim. Other senior officers found themselves seconded to colonial forces for active service. Sir Derek Capper, Chief Constable of the West Midlands, was sent to the Gold Coast. Assistant Commissioner Peter Brodie went to Ceylon. Two successive Commissioners of Police in Fiji were British police officers, one from Cumbria and the other from the East Midlands. Throughout the seventies, Michael Macoun supervised a rota which kept more than forty British policemen on a variety of secondments throughout the remaining colonies, including Hong Kong.

Those fortunate enough to be offered an expenses-paid short tour were expected to look and learn as they went and to report what they found. The Foreign Office title for these exercises was 'familiarization instructional tour'. They were also supposed to give the benefit of their experience to the colonial officers whose hospitality they enjoyed. Michael Macoun was eager to make the exchange as engrossing as possible: 'We made them sing for their dinner. All these high-powered police officers had to give lectures. We had a fairly tight programme for them so they wouldn't spend all their time on the beaches or in the knocking-shops in Bangkok.' Along their route, the seeds were sown of a lasting and influential relationship. It was still below the surface when Michael Macoun retired in 1979. He left office convinced that the practices of colonial police forces had no effect whatever on British domestic policing: 'It would have been out of the question because of the different circumstances and the fact that we only had a limited accountability.'

Looking back from the vantage-point of his retirement home in Surrey, he now sees those early contacts he fostered between British officers and their counterparts abroad in a different

light. Inadvertently, he thinks, they began the process of bringing colonial policing to mainland Britain:

That must be a key to it. So many UK officers over the last decade and a half served overseas that some of them must have learned something about public order tactics which presumably they brought back with them. I should have realized that.

It was a reversal of the customary colonial process. As John Alderson tartly remarks, the usual practice was for developed British traditions to be exported to the colonies. In police circles, the first time this import came to light was at the ACPO conference of September 1981 (see Part 2) when Richard Quine, Director of Operations of the Royal Hong Kong Police was invited to attend and outline the colonial police systems for dealing with public disorder. Outside police circles, this visit was kept secret, of course. ACPO and the Royal Hong Kong Police hit it off well enough for their link to be made formal and permanent. Richard Quine's superior, the Commissioner of Police, was invited to attend all future meetings of ACPO and to bring other senior colonial officers with him. In 1982, the Commissioner, Roy Henry, began coming to Britain for ACPO meetings on the whole range of policing matters, with special emphasis on public order. His status at ACPO conferences was that of participating observer.

Immediately after the visit by Richard Quine, ACPO asked if their specialists in public order could visit Hong Kong to see the colonial techniques in practice. Roy Henry was more than happy to accommodate them, and the group studied the Hong Kong force during their exploratory tour of foreign police tactics in many countries. In 1983, a formal agreement was concluded between ACPO and Hong Kong to permit regular exchanges of operational officers. Three Superintendents from British forces were sent to Hong Kong for extended periods of secondment, in exchange for three colonial Superintendents who visited Britain. Roy Henry says he was flattered by the interest which was suddenly shown in his Hong Kong tactics, and was keen to help introduce them to Britain: 'We had several requests for police officers of middle strata level who were experts in the field of public order to visit us and see what they could lift from Hong Kong which would be useful to them.'

The exchange arrangement has continued, with the purpose of tightening police liaison between Hong Kong and Britain. The transfers are managed through the office of the Chief Inspector of Constabulary at the Home Office. The visiting British officers have been receptive to the tactics of their colonial partners. According to Roy Henry's account, they have raised no objection to adopting what they have seen in operation: 'Oh no, the very opposite. There has been great understanding. There is no doubt that when they looked at our systems, our methods and our tactics they said "We like that, yes".'

In November 1987, the Royal Hong Kong Police advertised in *Police Review* for British police officers to go out and join them. Their slogan ran: 'Royal Hong Kong Police – the proving ground for natural leaders'.

The significance of Hong Kong is that it embodies the British colonial police tradition in the most important colony left and the most difficult to police. Its public order tactics are a compendium of methods which have been tried and tested for forty years in all the former colonies. They have repressed dissent and put down uprisings in the Caribbean, up and down Africa, in the Middle East, the Indian sub-continent and in the Far East.

Roy Henry has now retired (since 1985) and is living comfortably in Surrey surrounded by his collection of presentation police shields from visiting forces. He is an ebullient raconteur who takes great pride in the contribution his men have made to shaping British domestic police tactics. His background, like that of many colonial police officers, is military, and he has the bearing for which tweed jackets and cavalry twill trousers were invented. He sports a pipe with an enormous bowl, and punctuates his anecdotes by frequent and near-lethal use of a Zippo lighter.

Where Michael Macoun's practical experience was in colonial Africa, Roy Henry's was in the Far East. He was sent to Malaya first, worked his way up to Commissioner in Sarawak and then Fiji before his career reached its peak for six and a half years as Commissioner in Hong Kong:

Hong Kong had the advantage of being one of the last of the Crown Colonies and was therefore able to look back at history in other territories. We studied the internal security mechanisms of past colonies such as Malaya, Borneo, Kenya and Cyprus. They had a public order problem in each of those territories. So we were able to pick and choose the best from all of them and adapt it into the Hong Kong machine.

Attendance at ACPO conferences between 1982 and 1985 gave Roy Henry a privileged view of the system and tactics adopted for use in Britain and enshrined in the *Public Order Manual* produced in 1983. He has not yet acquired ACPO's habit of silence, and shows no hesitation in confirming the extent to which the tactical options adopted for Britain are those of the Hong Kong machine:

They reflect it in several fundamental ways. There are many things which are now being taught and practised in United Kingdom forces which were in existence in Hong Kong. There is a definite reflection of similar methods.

The details are even more significant. ACPO has imported manoeuvres and tactics from a wide variety of sources. But close examination reveals that its main escalations of offensive police action are those developed in Hong Kong. The formation of riot squads armed with truncheons and short shields; their training in specialist techniques for dispersing a crowd or making selective arrests from it; the use of sophisticated intelligence-gathering to target individuals; the development of CS gas and plastic bullets as weapons of penultimate resort. All reflect the tactics of colonial police forces.

The language used to describe the new police approach is striking. Roy Henry talks about 'the projection of police units in an efficient, effective and *formidable* manner which creates an atmosphere in the riotous mobs of apprehension and awe which could be close to *fear*' [my emphasis]. ACPO talks, as we have seen earlier, about the need to present a *formidable* appearance and the purpose of creating *fear* in a disorderly crowd. Both present the ultimate aim of police attacks in the same term: 'dispersal'. Roy Henry says that if the police get it right, a crowd will scatter: 'They run like the dickens!'

ACPO also draws heavily on colonial experience in its blueprint for a control structure which enables a Chief Constable to transform his force on command into a paramilitary fighting unit. This is the chassis of Roy Henry's Hong Kong machine, and ACPO has imported it direct. Normal policing involves officers scattered throughout the force area going about their normal range of duties and this is called the 'watch and ward structure'; in an emergency, orders are radioed to all officers to get into paramilitary gear and await instructions on a force-wide basis, and this is called the 'public order structure'. The Hong Kong police force has been training so long that it can now switch from one structure to the other in a matter of hours. This is precisely the skill which ACPO has brought to Britain and which hundreds of thousands of man-hours have been spent practising since 1983.

By the time of the Broadwater Farm riot in October 1985, the Metropolitan Police were so skilful at this transformation that they could carry it out even on a Sunday evening. The officer in charge at the Wood Green control room, Commander David Polkinghorne, gave an authoritative account of the operation to an international police conference in London in September 1987. He accepted that the battle had gone badly for the police for several hours, and said that at 9.45 p.m., almost three hours after the first disturbances, his men were losing so heavily that he requested the Commissioner at New Scotland Yard to approve the use of baton rounds, a request which was immediately granted. In the event, the riot receded and no plastic bullets were actually fired. Commander Polkinghorne was frank in his speech about

police shortcomings on the night. But he spoke with pride of their success in getting more than a thousand men into riot gear and out on the estate in disciplined units:

Our Force Mobilization Plan worked exceedingly well: 400 police were deployed within the estate in the first hour; 500 within an hour and a half; 750 in three hours and more than a thousand by 11.30 p.m. [four and a half hours]. Control was able to despatch and account for all those serials on the ground.

He then outlined the new public order structure which the Metropolitan Police have introduced to ensure that this feat can be repeated whenever it may be ordered:

The District Support Units have merged with the Special Patrol Group to form the Territorial Support Group. We have now got eight such units throughout London of 100 men each, under their own command structure. Normally, they are under the divisional Chief Superintendent, but when they are employed on public order events they will be under the cadres of senior officers or under their own command. So that is 800 fully trained shield men with equipped vehicles that we have got throughout London to deal with probable problems.

This arrangement is the British equivalent of colonial riot control units stationed at strategic points and occupied with other duties until the call comes for them to drop everything and deal with a local disturbance.

Roy Henry defines it as the switch into a paramilitary role and argues that its implications for the police could hardly be more profound:

Public order structure is almost the very opposite of the normal watch and ward structure. In normal policing, the constable is on his own, he is told to think for himself and act on his initiative, to be an individual. In the public order structure it is the very opposite. He is part and parcel of a group, a platoon or a company. He is told *not* to act on his own but to wait for orders, *not* to use his initiative. So it is a complete volte-face.

As we shall see in Part 10, this view is repeated almost exactly in the study notes given to Metropolitan Police recruits during their training at Hendon and Hounslow. The required 'volte-face' involves a complete change of principles. For while the watch and ward structure needs officers to act as policemen, the public order structure demands that they behave like soldiers. It does not, of course, actually turn them into soldiers, but it does depend on their ability to accept military discipline and conduct manoeuvres with military precision. Most significantly of all, it requires them to think of themselves as members of an army rather than a constabulary. This aspect of the transformation is explicitly recognized in the *Public Order Manual* under the section on military concepts entitled 'Borrowed terminology' (see Part 1).

The relationship between British police forces and their mentors in Hong Kong continues today as warmly as ever. It has become such a strong habit that Roy Henry regards it as part of the routine to keep Britain up to date with the colonial state of the art:

If something new should evolve in Hong Kong I am sure that it would flow to the United Kingdom – and vice versa. If there should be new equipment, new thoughts, new tactics, then both sides will gain on a mutual exchange of information.

To its supporters and practitioners, there is cause neither for surprise nor for alarm in ACPO's policy of importing colonial police practices into Britain. To them, the worsening situation confronting the police justifies the measures adopted. They point to picket-lines at Grunwick, Warrington, Orgreave and Wapping and to riots in Brixton, Handsworth, Toxteth and Tottenham as evidence of increasing violence in public places. They also assume a general level of public consent on the ground that the police are acting to hold the line for the rest of society. This view leaves one fact unexplained. ACPO has taken great care shroud its new policy in secrecy. It is difficult to see this as a sign of faith in public support. It suggests, to the contrary, that a profound shift in thinking has taken place among some senior police officers which leads them to treat parts of Britain like colonies. Tactics which were previously reserved for use against subject peoples overseas, are now considered appropriate for the control of British citizens at home. Whether or not it was ever morally right to employ

them for foreign suppression, the decision to import these tactics into domestic policing is of the greatest political significance. ACPO has decided in secret that parts of Britain's population should be treated, on occasion, like hostile aliens. Can they avoid the conclusion that, for some purposes, it is no longer their intention to police by consent?

The policy adopted in 1981 represents the most radical break with police tradition since 1830. It is hard to imagine that it was undertaken without the support of ACPO's political masters. Such support would be unlikely under the decentralized structure of political control which theoretically governs British police forces. Nobody could seriously expect the wide variety of local government police authorities to welcome a policing revolution with such dramatic implications. But a way was found to by-pass the disobedient processes of democracy. The matter was decided by the Home Office and the police themselves.