

# A force divided

## Philip Rawlings on the development of the role of the detective in the police force.

When Robert Peel announced the establishment of the Metropolitan Police in 1829, his declared intention was to improve crime control (Rawlings, 2002). Since he subscribed to the general view that petty criminals would eventually turn to felony, his aim was to prevent petty crime through the conspicuous presence of uniformed officers in those communities identified as deviant and through the arrest of minor offenders. As Colonel Rowan, one of the first commissioners, famously put it in 1834, "We look upon it that we are watching St James's and other places while we are watching St Giles and bad places in general" (Select Committee, 1834). This meant that Peel rejected the model of crime control based on the detection of felons, which had been developed by Bow Street magistrates in the previous century and which rested on the idea that, "the Certainty...of speedy Detection, must deter some at least" (Fielding, 1768: vi). The general dislike of government spies in the early nineteenth

they expressed contempt for Scotland Yard, these stories held out the possibility that detection would control crime, which the Peel model had failed to achieve. By the early twentieth century the incorporation of scientific techniques into detection seemed further to obscure the distinction between fiction and fact. Dr Edmond Locard's theory of exchange posited the idea "that every contact leaves traces" and offered the hope of discovering criminals "solely from the imprints of the traces which they have left" (Morrish, 1955: 74; Locard, 1920: 19). Science promised a shift from "the frailty and uncertainty of the human element in witnesses and of their contradictory assertions" to a situation where the detective "may read and interpret evidence which is not the opinion of a fallible mind but is the direct and accurate interpretation of the infallible laws of nature" leading to "a kind of proof which never lies and never alters its tale" (Home Office, 1936: 3, 4).

This image of detective work was important to the police, and it was quite distinct from popular

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century may also have brought him to the opinion that appointing detectives would undermine the new police. As late as 1869, a commissioner of the Met remarked, "The detective system...is viewed with the greatest suspicion...and it is, in fact, entirely foreign to the habits and feelings of the nation." (Moylean, 1934: 185)

The Met did not, therefore, leap to fill the gap left by the abolition of the Bow Street detectives in 1839, and even when the Detective Department was established in 1842 it comprised only eight officers. Yet, in spite of their small numbers and minimal impact on crime, the detectives gripped popular imagination. Charles Dickens scuttled around after them and they featured in newspapers, the *Illustrated Police News*, detective autobiographies, novels and melodramas. What made them attractive was the secretive nature of their work and the supposed skill it required. In 1864, one detective wrote:

"The province of a detective officer is peculiar, and requires an entire devotion to its duties in order to be successful. Even then, many fail, as is attested by the fact that throughout the whole range of the police few are known as experts in the art of catching thieves" (Hughes, 1864: vi).

This image was reinforced by fictional private detectives because, even if like Sherlock Holmes,

perceptions of uniformed officers, whether of the friendly bobby-on-the-beat or the truncheon-wielding kind. Yet detectives did not fit comfortably into Peel's police. As envisaged in 1829, the model of crime control needed officers to stamp their authority on communities. It did not require them to exercise skill or discretion; indeed, great efforts were made to exclude these elements by recruitment policies, quasi-military discipline and rigorous supervision. The detective, on the other hand, appeared to rely on a combination of skill and cooperation with communities. The detective "should...be possessed of the tact of being able to mix to some extent with the criminal classes, and even to conciliate their friendship" (Hughes, 1864: vii). This meant, according to one journalist in 1884, that far from implementing the Peel model of arresting petty offenders, the detective was prepared to ignore them, "so long as he does nothing very desperate, and serves the detective well with hints and suggestions" (Petrow, 1993: 100).

Uniformed officers were said to resent the fact that, while they were subject to military discipline, the detectives operated "in secret, away from supervision and control" (Petrow, 1993: 93). Moreover, as the Royal Commission on Police Powers noted in 1929, many thought there was "a tendency among this branch of the service to regard

Julie Grogan photo



Statue of Robert Peel, Police Training College, Hendon

itself as a thing above and apart, to which the restrictions and limitations placed on the ordinary police do not, or should not apply” (Evans, 1974: 108). In the 1970s, Robert Mark, commissioner of the Met, wrote that the uniformed officer “bears the brunt of violence...and he has long resented the airs and graces of the CID...the CID regarded itself as an elite body, higher paid by way of allowances and factually, fictionally and journalistically more glamorous”. For him the CID at that time was “the most routinely corrupt organisation in London” (Hobbs, 1992: 72, 73).

Since uniformed officers were regarded by many as the true and moral heart of policing, it should come as no surprise to find that there have been regular attempts to integrate detectives within the Peel tradition. The moral re-education of detectives through transfers into uniform has been tried on several occasions, most notably, by Vincent in the 1880s, Trenchard in the 1930s and Mark in the 1970s. Other experiments, such as unit beat policing in the 1960s, sought to improve cooperation and information flow between the uniform and detective branches. But the idea that these groups of officers are interchangeable has never been presented with much conviction, if only because it could undermine the important image of detection as complex and skilled.

Of course, there are major differences between the Met in the Victorian period and today, but the basic structural division remains. Indeed, the gap has deepened through the proliferation of specialist detective squads and the development of new scientific techniques. And, while the detective flourishes, the Peel model of uniformed police has been discarded, first, by beat officers, who found total disconnection from the policed community impractical, and, more recently, by official policy, which has sought to connect police and policed. Yet there still seems no convincing place in this new model of police for the detective.

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