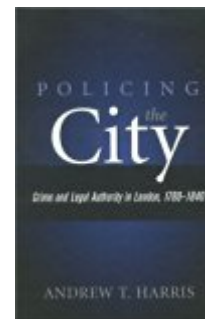


Andrew T. Harris. *Policing the City: Crime and Legal Authority in London, 1780-1840.* Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2004. x + 205 pp. \$41.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8142-0966-0.



Reviewed by Elaine Reynolds

Published on H-Law (June, 2006)

To this day the City of London maintains its own police force, separate from the larger and more famous Metropolitan Police. The City thus forms a hole in the very center of Scotland Yard's jurisdiction. Much of the history of London's policing has been content to note that fact and go on telling the story of the "real" police, the officers and men of "the Met." The major exception, until recently, was Donald Rumbelow's *I Spy Blue: The Police and Crime in the City of London from Elizabeth I to Victoria* (1971). Andrew Harris's work thus puts him in two recent trends in London police history: that which is examining the pre-1829, pre-Scotland Yard system of police and that which focuses on the City. As a scholar who is part of the former, I admit to being intimidated by the Corporation Record Office and the complexity of the Corporation itself. Thus I chose to write about policing the pre-1829 doughnut: greater London and Westminster and its many parishes.[1] In the latter group, John Beattie has most recently published his work on the City's police in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.[2] Beattie and Harris thus do not overlap in time period,

but they do both focus on this important square mile.

Harris picks up the story of the City and its law enforcement in the crucial decade of the 1780s. The War for American Independence forced authorities, central and local, to confront some of the short comings of the criminal justice system. In particular, the end of transportation to North America highlighted the problem of criminal punishments, including questions about deterrence and crime prevention. This, in turn, raised questions about the prevention and detection of crime, functions primarily in the hands of local authorities like the Corporation of the City of London. Harris covers, in detail, the structure and operations of ward night watches and City-wide patrols, and the kinds of changes that were implemented to prevent property crime, to control prostitution, and to contain riots in the period up to the 1830s. Harris argues that the locally controlled system of policing within the City, specifically its wards, was responsive to residents' needs and thus an effective police. These included adding more men to the City forces (day and

night), increased supervision, and more regular record-keeping. Because London's resident population and crime rate apparently were both declining in this period, Harris holds that changes in policing had more to do with the ideological commitment of City elites to centralization and uniformity as the hallmarks of an "efficient" police. But the citizens who ran the wards continued to hold a different view of what "efficient" meant, preferring the flexibility that local control conferred. These differing visions meant police reform in the City, like the rest of the metropolis, was thus an evolutionary process. Harris puts it neatly, when he states, "In all respects, policing the City evolved gradually in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and no single point defines when the City's police became more 'modern' or 'professional'" (p. 153). One of the more unique threads that Harris follows is the internal debate in the City about what constituted effective policing, which mirrored the debate about metropolitan law enforcement. Instead of a clash of interests between the Home Office and parish vestries, in the City it was the Court of Aldermen who were pushing for a greater degree of centralization and uniformity against the wards and the Court of Common Council who favored a higher degree of local control and were willing to live with diversity and local discretion. The wards held on longer than the vestries did. But the more elite version of an "efficient" police gained influence and City leaders worried about protecting the unique autonomy of the City. The result was the centralization of the City Police under the authority of the Court of Aldermen in 1838. Harris thus contributes another piece of evidence that shows the gradual emergence of "modern" policing out of local practice and leadership rather than springing, fully formed, from the head of Sir Robert Peel in 1829.

There are some disappointments here. The book betrays its origins as a doctoral dissertation by its narrow focus. This leaves room for work by others or, perhaps, Harris himself will be able to

tackle some of these issues in the future. There are only three pages allotted for background on the City and how it was governed. The spare text also does not give us much of a sense of who were the movers and shakers in the City, especially in the two Courts. Harris does give us a somewhat fuller picture of the work of Matthew Wood, alderman and mayor in the early 1820s. It is too bad we do not know more about others, their backgrounds, and the range of opinion. At times, Harris presents the Court of Aldermen or Common Council and their respective positions as rather monolithic. This may be a result of the record keeping, which was certainly my experience with vestry records. Minutes recorded decisions made and little of the debate. But it would have been helpful, then, if Harris could have done more with newspapers or published pamphlets. Likewise, I wondered to what extent City leaders interacted with other local and central authorities. Are there any records of correspondence between Wood and Robert Peel, for example? Alderman Wood not only testified for Peel's 1828 Select Committee on the Police of the Metropolis, he was also a member of that committee. How did City authorities interact with the Bow Street system of Police Offices created in 1792, staffed by professional magistrates and constables, or the New Police of Scotland Yard? Harris quotes testimony given by Col. Charles Rowan and Richard Mayne, the Commissioners of the Metropolitan Police for a City inquiry into the police in 1832 (pp. 144-145). One wonders what kind of relationship developed at both the higher and lower levels of these forces. So while Harris had done admirable work with the Corporation Records, I would have been interested to see to what extent developments in the City fit within the wider context.

I would recommend the book for a specialist audience: those interested in the history of policing. But it is also for those interested in the City. The political and administrative history of the City in the eighteenth century has not attracted as much attention as the seventeenth century, as

portrayed, for example, in the work of Gary De Kray. London as hothouse for social and economic change has benefited from the attentions of many fine scholars, including George Rude, Peter Earle, Roy Porter, and L. D. Schwartz. But the fact that work published by Lucy Sutherland in the 1950s about City politics in the mid-eighteenth century are still cited routinely tells us that this is an area that could stand some scrutiny.[3] Harris's work, like that of John Beattie, gives us an entree into that arena, even if only on this one topic, showing how the various layers of City government and its constituent parts worked together or, sometimes, fought together.

I am glad to see Harris's work in print. He has an interesting story to tell and he tells it compellingly. I wish he had had more room or time to place that story in a wider context. Perhaps that can be his next book.

Notes

[1]. Elaine A. Reynolds, *Before the Bobbies: The Night Watch and Police Reform in Metropolitan London 1720-1830* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).

[2]. John Beattie, *Policing and Punishment in London: Urban Crime and the Limits of Terror* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

[3]. Lucy Sutherland, *The City of London and the Opposition to Government, 1768-1774: A Study in the Rise of Metropolitan Radicalism* (London: Athlone Press, 1959).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-law>

Citation: Elaine Reynolds. Review of Harris, Andrew T. *Policing the City: Crime and Legal Authority in London, 1780-1840*. H-Law, H-Net Reviews. June, 2006.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11867>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.