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John Merriman. *Police Stories: Building the French State, 1815-1851.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. viii + 254 pp. $55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-507253-2.

Reviewed by Stacey Davis (European History, Evergreen State College)
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Uncovering the Lives of France's Nineteenth-Century Police and Those They Watched

In *Police Stories: Building the French State, 1815-1851*, Yale historian John Merriman's accomplishments are two-fold: first, he creates a detailed picture of the identities, careers, and daily activities of France's nineteenth-century urban police chiefs, the *commissaires de police*, or CPs. At the same time, Merriman places his descriptions of the hiring, firing, and retirement of CPs, along with richly documented stories of the attempts by the *commissaires* to limit urban begging, monitor the movements of both strangers and goods through towns, guarantee the cleanliness of public spaces, and catch thieves, into the larger context of the rapidly centralizing French state. Underlying both strands of his story, however, is the author's conviction of the limits of those analyses of policing in modern France which, inspired by Michel Foucault, have "the police helping capitalism impose its own order by expanding the regulation of social life" (p. 11). Thus, even as he enumerates the ways in which the careers of the CPs became more professionalized and their activities fell more firmly under the control of the centralized administration, Merriman refuses to equate this change with the growing bourgeois character of urban public space. Indeed, as the myriad examples from police files of towns all across France demonstrate, the policing of French municipalities in the first half of the nineteenth century remained strikingly similar to Ancien RÃ©gime practices from the eigtheenth century. In important ways CPs continued to respect local social traditions in a manner very much at odds with the Foucaultian image of the bourgeois functionary obsessed with the discipline, order, categorization and surveillance of the lower classes.

Throughout the nineteenth century, France's *commissaires de police* were only one branch of a complex web of crime deterrence and surveillance which included roving *gendarmes* under the control of the Ministry of War, rural *gardes champetres* who watched fields and forests, simple police agents in towns, and even members of the judiciary, like the procureurs who interrogated suspected criminals. However, the CPs, the sole focus of this book, quickly became the linchpin of France's urban police system from their establishment in 1791 during the French Revolution. By the early years of the Restoration of the monarchy, most towns with more than five thousand inhabitants, as well as smaller municipalities on important trade routes or near frontiers, had at least one CP.

Merriman devotes the first three chapters of his book to the identity and career of the typical CP, and the next three to the numerous municipal, judicial and political policing functions of the *commissaires*. The first half of the nineteenth century was an era of frequent and often violent political change in France, and the 1815 Restoration, the 1830 Revolution which ushered in the constitutional July Monarchy, the 1848 Revolution beginning the Second Republic, and a variety of less drastic political upheavals in between, all brought political purges of the national and local administration, including the *commissaires de police*. However, Merriman's thorough examination of CP files spanning these decades from departments across the nation proves that, political instability notwithstanding, the CPs became increasingly professionalized over time: "only the Restoration had hired incompetent CPs solely on political grounds," and then only for that regime's first few years (p. 88). Quickly professional competence became crucial, and more CPs were fired for sloppy work habits or poor writing ability, than for unfavorable political views. Furthermore, CPs, most of whom came from lower middle-class military or clerical backgrounds, increasingly referred to their "careers," desired retirement pensions (which they rarely received), and turned to published policing manuals for standard report formulas and procedures. Such tendencies, coupled with the French prefects' preference for appointing outsiders rather than local men, increased the collective identity of the *commissaires* as a group of professional

functionaries, representatives of the central state somewhat removed from the societies they policed.

CPs had a wide range of responsibilities, which *Police Stories* describes in detail: in three chapters chock full of colorful examples pulled from over eighty departments, the author explores both "expected" events demanding the CPs' attention, like the surveillance of travelers, beggars and prostitutes, or the policing of public spaces, fairs and town toll gates, and the less common "unexpected" occurrences such as thefts, suicides and the very rare social disturbance. Here the specific tales of travelers who crossed the paths of CPs, like that of Jacques Marcou (a French sailor whose ship set sail without him, forcing him to walk hundreds of miles back home) or the story of the newly orphaned ten-year old Jacques Coste (found crying alone on a road with nowhere to go), paint a vivid picture of just how easily the working poor could slip into desperate indigence, especially once they had lost ties to a specific locale and became wanderers chased by CPs from each town they entered (pp. 125, 139). Since CPs often did little more than expel such unfortunates from their jurisdictions, and included few comments in their subsequent written reports, such examples tell the reader more about the depth of poverty in nineteenth-century France than they do about the CPs' attitudes towards these duties.

One of the most important stories of *Police Stories* is that of the role of the CPs in the increasing reach of the French centralized state. The commissaires were both a symbol and a symptom of such centralization. In his most compelling chapter, Merriman explores the tensions between mayors and prefects (the chief administrator in each department) over the exact role of the *commissaires*. Since CPs' salaries were paid by each municipality from funds collected at town toll gates, and since CPs were in theory responsible to mayors, local administrators demanded that *commissaires* attend primarily to policing issues of local importance, like the deterrence of petty crime and the assurance of clean, quiet, safe public streets. In addition, mayors clearly wanted their CPs to be local men familiar with regional customs and the local dialect.

Prefects had other priorities. As the principal representatives of the central administration in the provinces, the prefects, who reported directly to the Minister of the Interior, were much more concerned with issues of national importance. Above all, in an era wrought with political intrigue and wracked by revolutions, they were determined to root out political opposition before it transformed into seditious action. Thus prefects, the men who hired, fired and transferred France's *commissaires de police*, demanded with insistence and astonishing frequency, in letters fraught with "the language of paranoia," that the CPs devote endless hours to the "haute police," or the tracking and surveillance of every person suspected of potential political resistance.[1]

As Merriman demonstrates, mayors and their allies on local municipal councils did not take kindly to the prefects' interference. In one well-documented example, in the giant urban conglomeration of Lyon, a city with a strong tradition of independence, local authorities fought a decades-long battle of wills with the prefect, demanding either less political policing by the CPs or a reduction in the numbers of *commissaires* in favor of the more locally focused simple police agents under each CP's command. In the end, despite the local funding of CP salaries, prefects successfully asserted the primacy of political policing; in Lyon the major insurrections of the city's silk workers in 1831 and 1834 convinced local authorities of the necessity of the CPs' political work even before central administrators reorganized the city to suppress the office of the mayor completely, as had earlier been done in Paris. By 1852, when a national law placed all *commissaires* firmly under the control of the prefects, "the battle between mayors and prefects had already been won by the central government in Paris" (p. 184). Now even more than ever, each CP who walked through his town was a physical symbol of the reach of France's central administration.

Although this story of centralization seems to fit neatly into a Foucault-style analysis of the increased insistence for rational, bourgeois order, hierarchy and control in nineteenth-century French society, Merriman notes important limits to this tendency. Indeed, he takes pains to track the significant continuities between nineteenth-century practices and those of the previous century. CPs did not treat all of the lower class folks they encountered in the same manner. As during the Ancien Regime, "CPs took a markedly different approach to outsiders than to locals," allowing begging and even prostitution from local townspeople but not strangers (p. 13). Furthermore, although CPs were increasingly not natives of the towns they policed, they often tolerated some traditional forms of social disturbances, like the charivaris in which masked young men harassed neighbors they considered somehow out of step with local norms. And in a few intriguing examples which merit further discussion, Merriman demonstrates that *commissaires* could act as negotiators brokering compromises between town inhabitants and other representatives of authority, as in one conflict between a priest and prostitutes clamoring

to bury one of their own (p. 154). Such examples show that for all their links to state centralization, CPs still occupied a somewhat ambiguously in-between position in the towns they policed, and that their roles were not so different from those of pre-revolutionary police a century early.

Merriman's emphasis on the "dull routine of police operations," and his demonstration that "provincial cities were surprisingly free of crime," raise intriguing questions for the reader (pp. 145, 148). Could prefects and the central administration demand (and receive from the CPs) so much attention on political policing precisely because of the low levels and routine nature of everyday crimes? Did mayors' insistence on the importance of municipal police functions stem completely from local concerns and a resentment of state centralization, or did it also indicate a healthy skepticism of the prefects' obsession with anti-government plots and plotters? Finally, did the opinions of people not in the administration regarding the *commissaires* they encountered, from writers to opposition politicians to the unfortunates arrested by the CPs, change noticeably over the course of the century or as a result of the increasing professionalization of the *commissaires*? Along with a heavier editorial hand to catch the not-so-infrequent editing glitches, *Police Stories* could have benefited from further exploration of such questions.

Police Stories does not include any analysis with which previous historians of France's nineteenth-century police force, like Clive Emsley, Richard Cobb and Howard Payne, would disagree.[2] However, in this detailed and fascinating look at France's *commissaires de police*, Merriman has again done what he does best: comb an astounding number of local archives across France to compile a richly nuanced portrait of the lives and aspirations both of the nineteenth- century urban police and the regular, often valiantly struggling, folks they encountered in their duties. In this way, *Police Stories* is a welcome addition to the history of urban policing, a thoroughly enjoyable read which reinserts the human drama into a topic all-too-often studied only at the level of state policy or criminal theory.

Notes

[1]. The history of such repression has been thoroughly explored in numerous monographs, including Merriman's own *The Agony of the Republic: The Repression of the Left in Revolutionary France, 1848-1851* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978).

[2]. See Clive Emsley, *Gendarmes and the State in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Richard Cobb, *The Police and the People: French Popular Protest, 1789-1820* (New York: Oxford University Press ,1972); and Howard Payne, *The Police State of Louis Napoleon Bonaparte* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1966).

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