

A TRIAL OF STRENGTH.

THE POLICING OF BELFAST 1870-1914.

**‘Thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements of the University
of Liverpool for the degree of Doctor in Philosophy by Mark Philip
Radford’.**

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THE POLICING OF BELFAST 1870-1914**

BY

M. P. RADFORD

ABSTRACT

The aim of this thesis has been to examine the development of the Royal Irish Constabulary (R.I.C.) in Belfast between 1870 and 1914 in order to determine the extent to which a semi-military constabulary adapted to the problems that a city posed. The aim has been to see if the R.I.C., as the most public face of British government, was successful in controlling a recalcitrant Irish urban populace, with the objective of ascertaining whether or not any police force could contain, cure or control this city of 'riots and religion'.

Detailed investigation of the R.I.C. in Belfast has shown that the force was never able to resolve the dichotomy between civil and semi-military policing. Further analysis has revealed that the sectarian divisions of Belfast created tensions which the police had to contain and control and its record of success in this regard was an erratic one. However, it could never cure these divisions by dint of good police work and if the force did fail to a degree in Belfast, it was a matter of failing to do the impossible.

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were particularly helpful. No study of Ireland would be complete without an extended visit to the Public Record Office at Kew, London, and to those staff I express my thanks. Thanks are also due to the staff of the Belfast Newspaper Library, the Linenhall Library, the University of Exeter Library and the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland. There are a number of private individuals who have been kind enough to support this project either by the loan of papers, photographs or have helped me in a myriad of other ways and they deserve my heartfelt appreciation. These individuals are legion, but pre-eminent are; Brenda Tout, Maureen Lowry, Christina McKenzie, Andrew Boyd and Farrell Leddy.

My greatest regret is that my mother, Lorna Margaret Radford, cannot see this work. To her I owe everything.

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INTRODUCTION

As recently as 2000, the myth that the Royal Irish Constabulary (R.I.C.) was a completely semi-military police force foisted upon the hapless Irish population by the colonising English was still being advocated.¹ This mistaken analysis almost certainly had its origins in 1869, when the constabulary's own historian chose to pay overwhelming attention to the force's semi-military role.² In County Inspector Robert Curtis's account of the R.I.C., scant attempt was made to describe the routine daily grind of police and civil duties that the R.I.C. was required to perform. Little wonder then, that Republicans subsequently claimed that the R.I.C.'s history was one of a 'continuity of brutal treason against their own people [performing] base....functions....vile [was] the position they occup[ied]',³ and this view prevailed, with little dissension, until 1970.

The first chip at this Republican monolith was executed by Galen Broeker in his work *Rural Disorder and Police Reform in Ireland, 1812-36*, which was followed by Charles Townsend's masterly treatise, *Political Violence in Ireland: Government and Resistance since 1848*, and Stanley Palmer's *Police and Protest in England and Ireland 1780-1850*.⁴ These works challenged the notion that the R.I.C. was nothing more than soldiers in bottle-green police uniforms and correctly characterised the

¹ G. Ellison and J. Smyth, *The Crowned Harp: Policing Northern Ireland* (London, 2000), p.15.

² R. Curtis, *History of the Royal Irish Constabulary* (London, 1869).

³ E. DeValera in a speech to the Irish Dail on 10 April 1919, quoted in F.S.L. Lyons, *Ireland Since the Famine* (London, 1977), p.407.

⁴ G. Broeker, *Rural Disorder and Police Reform in Ireland, 1812-36* (London, 1970), C. Townshend, *Political Violence in Ireland: Government and Resistance since 1848* (Oxford, 1983) and S.H. Palmer, *Police and Protest in England and Ireland 1780-1850* (Cambridge, 1988).

force as one in which there was a considerable docket of civil police duties performed which did not carry any political connotations.

This necessary debate about an oft-neglected occupational group received further attention from Brian Griffin and Ian Bridgeman in their respective theses and, in a seminal article on the ‘domestication’ of the R.I.C., Elizabeth Malcolm and Bill Lowe⁵ definitively put to rest the contention that ‘the R.I.C. were never policemen’.⁶ However, given the overwhelmingly agrarian nature of Irish society in the 19th century, the main thrust of these scholarly works was very much concerned with the rural constabulary. By contrast, no study exists which examines the force in a urban context. This thesis attempts to correct that imbalance.

Because of the need to cover a representative timeframe and to examine in depth all aspects of policing a conurbation, the focus of the thesis will, of necessity, be a narrow one. Belfast was chosen because it best represented the whole gamut of challenges that faced an urban policeman. In this town (a city after 1888) the R.I.C. policeman had to cope with the evils of sectarianism, public order and disorder and petty, serious and political crime in all its forms. The timeframe chosen was narrowed to cover the crucial period immediately after the R.I.C. became responsible for the policing of the town up to the outbreak of the First World War. To have

⁵ B. Griffin, ‘The Irish Police, 1836-1914: A Social History’ (unpublished PhD. dissertation, Loyola University of Chicago, 1990), I.R. Bridgeman, ‘Policing Rural Ireland: A Study of the Origins, Development and Role of the Irish Constabulary, and its Impact on Crime Prevention and Detection in the Nineteenth Century’ (unpublished PhD. dissertation, Open University, 1993), W.J. Lowe and E.L. Malcolm, ‘The Domestication of the Royal Irish Constabulary, 1836-1922’, *Irish Economic and Social History*, xix (1992), pp. 27-48.

⁶P. Beaslat, *Michael Collins and the Making of a New Ireland* (London, 1926), Volume One, p.319.

included the period of the 1914-18 conflict and the events leading up to partition was quite beyond this work, given the constraints of a doctoral thesis.

This thesis aims to examine in detail all aspects of the R.I.C. in Belfast in order to determine if a semi-military constabulary adapted successfully to the problems that a city posed. The aim is to consider the extent to which the R.I.C., as the most public face of British government, was successful in controlling a recalcitrant Irish urban populace, with the objective of ascertaining whether or not any police force could contain, cure or control the 'social volcano of the Empire'.⁷

Chapter One will concentrate on mapping out the background to Belfast's riots and the way that its citizens viewed the police in this context. It will also focus on the stormy relationship which the constabulary endured with the Belfast City Council, and how this problematical association impacted on urban policing. Further, it will look at Belfast's failure to establish an effective special constabulary and the reasons for that failure. Chapter Two is an attempt to get at the heart of the Belfast police community: its structure, organisation, duties, discipline, and compare and contrast the very differing career profiles of the officers and men. It will present a statistical breakdown of all the officers who were posted to Belfast between 1870 and 1914. A similar exercise will be conducted on a representative sample of the rank and file. A by-product of this study will be the comparison between the profile of a rural and urban policeman.

Chapter Three will look at all aspects of ordinary non-riotous crime in the city. It

⁷ M. Brophy, *Sketches of the Royal Irish Constabulary* (London, 1886), p.25.

will examine overall levels of serious crime during the period and assess what policing strategies the town force adopted and their effectiveness in this regard. It will survey minor or petty crime and analyse public perceptions of police efforts to contain this type of crime. Additionally, the chapter will describe the work of the detective branch, and analyse its perceived failure and its reorganisation. Finally, a judgement will be made on the overall efficiency of the crime branch special and its role in Belfast.

The following two chapters deal exclusively with what constituted an all-too-familiar policing experience for Belfast's constabulary, that of riot and its containment. The first of the chapters contains a narrative of the main riots to afflict the city during our period, each riot being studied to ascertain the performance of the R.I.C. The second chapter covers just one riot, or rather the series of riots that collectively became known as the 1886 riots. This in-depth study will probe each phase of the riots, detailing the R.I.C.'s responses and assessing the extent to which those responses were effective or appropriate.

The penultimate chapter, which whilst ostensibly dealing with one event, the Belfast police agitation of 1907, seeks to put that occurrence in the context of a continuum of R.I.C. agitation and discontent. The chapter addresses issues of police morale, government attempts to quash the agitation and the legacy to the R.I.C. of the government's failure to adequately meet police concerns. Chapter Seven presents an overview of the R.I.C. in Belfast during the fourteen years preceding the outbreak of WW1. This chapter will, by evaluating police reactions to the formation of Ulster's private armies, demonstrate the linkage between faulty government decisions to emasculate police intelligence capabilities beginning in 1900 and the

rise of these private armies. It will also seek to demonstrate that the constabulary's role in quelling the Belfast shipyard riots was fatally compromised by the army's historic reluctance to support the force. The chapter will conclude by showing how governmental neglect of the force and its failure to comprehensively address the issues of pay and conditions of service in 1907 led to a crisis of morale in the R.I.C.

Any thesis dealing with Irish police history suffers immediately from two significant drawbacks. These are, firstly, the destruction by fire of many of the administrative records during the Irish civil war and, secondly, the large number of records intentionally or neglectfully disposed of by successive post-1922 British administrations.⁸

As a consequence, the methodology employed in this thesis involves the use of an eclectic mix of sources to supplement any perceived shortfall in reliable data. These include pro-nationalist Irish newspapers such as *The Irish News* and *The Freeman's Journal* and pro-unionist Irish newspapers like *The Belfast Newsletter* and *The Northern Whig*. *The Times* and *The Illustrated London News* are used for an English perspective and Belfast journals and semi-official police publications are frequently employed for their particular viewpoint. Extensive use is made of the material from the Chief Secretary's Office divided between the National Archives, Dublin and the Public Record Office at Kew, London. I was fortunate to have access to the private diaries, reminiscences and letters of a number of policemen and their relatives and these documents will hopefully supplement this account of the Belfast R.I.C.

⁸ G. O'Brien, 'The Missing Personnel Records of the R.I.C.', *Irish Historical Studies*, xxxi, 124 (November 1999), pp. 505-512.

Specific approaches are detailed, where appropriate, in the relevant chapter.

Brian Griffin spoke of the anonymity of the Irish policeman in Irish historiography and set about correcting that anonymity; this thesis will attempt a similar task for the Belfast “peeler”.

CHAPTER I

THE MOST BARBAROUS OF TOWNS

Eugene O’Neil once wrote: ‘There is no present or future-only the past, happening over and over again-now’.¹ Nowhere, perhaps, has this more resonance than in the annual July and August protests at the “Peace Line” between the Lower Falls and the Shankill in Belfast. The English media, used to seeing violent Catholic attacks on the police, are exercised by what they see as the “recent spectacle” of Protestant demonstrators firing live ammunition at police lines. They make much of this and the antipathy shown by these loyalist protestors towards the police, commonly portrayed by the media as a wholly Protestant and loyal force. However, the hatred displayed by both Protestants and Catholics has more distant origins and is not a twentieth-or even twenty-first century phenomenon. This chapter aims to outline the genesis of Belfast’s public order difficulties and sketch the reasons for the hatred felt by many towards the police. It will also attempt to examine the relationship between Belfast’s Council and the R.I.C., in order to show how and why policing and policing strategies evolved as a result of this confrontational association.

One reporter in 1862 spoke of the ‘peculiarity’ of Belfast riots and characterised the ‘Irish Athens.... as one of the most barbarous of towns’; whilst another asked: ‘Why does Belfast, the pattern town of Ulster, treat itself to an annual series of riots?’² Likened to a ‘social volcano’ by Ex-Sergeant Michael Brophy of the R.I.C.,³

¹ E. O’Neill, *A Moon for the Misbegotten*, quoted in L. Uris, *Trinity* (London, 1976), p.11.

² *The Star*, 25 September 1862 and *The Cork Reporter*, 16 August 1864.

³ M. Brophy, *Sketches of the Royal Irish Constabulary* (London, 1886), p.25.

Belfast had endured frequent eruptions of public disorder during the nineteenth century, most notably in 1832 when four rioters were shot dead in inter-communal riots ‘by certain policemen at present unknown’⁴ who had been trying to separate the two religious factions. Earlier riots had occurred in 1813 and they continued in 1835, 1841, 1843 and 1852. These were merely precursors, however, to the second half of the century when far more serious riots took place in 1857, 1864, 1872, 1876, 1880, 1884, 1886, 1893 and 1898. Such urban riots were not a phenomenon unique to Belfast and one newspaper admitted that: ‘There are traditions of riot in almost every city and town’. Indeed, Londonderry experienced similar riots, on a smaller scale, at approximately the same times, but as the newspaper continued, those traditions were ‘more operative in Belfast than elsewhere’.⁵

Much later a local writer, Frankfort Moore, clearly influenced by Michael Brophy’s volcanic metaphor, identified “seismic areas”⁶ of Belfast where these riots occurred most frequently. These conflicts were usually very localised; indeed the worst riots in 1886 were almost all in West Belfast and in one section of that area. Prior to the building of the Protestant Shankill between 1864 and 1872, much of the rioting took place at the boundaries between the Catholic Pound (Lower Falls) area and Protestant Sandy Row. Once the Shankill was built many of the riots centred on this area, which became in 1886, ‘undeniably the cradle and nursing place of the riots’.⁷ But what was the root cause of these fratricidal conflicts?

⁴ *Northern Whig* (hereafter *NW*) 24 and 27 December 1832.

⁵ *The Star*, 25 September 1862.

⁶ F.F. Moore, *The Truth about Ulster* (London, 1914), p.48.

⁷ *Hansard* 3, Volume CCCVIII, 5 August to 9 September 1886, p.993, Mr Sexton.

Belfast at the turn of the nineteenth century was rapidly industrialising, first with cotton and then with linen manufacturing. As cotton manufacture declined, linen expanded so that by the 1870s Belfast had become the world's biggest linen production centre. Its rise as the "Linenopolis", coincided with the town's development of the largest shipbuilding and rope-manufacturing base in the world, together with a substantial port and engineering works.

Belfast's industrial growth was matched by the expansion of its population, which rose from 20,000 in 1800 to more than 53,000 in 1831, and by 1861 had grown to 121,602.⁸ The religious composition of the city altered significantly with the proportion of Catholics rising from 10% in 1800 to one in three by 1831 and, despite the proportion of Catholics declining in the latter half of the century, their absolute numbers grew from 41,000 in 1861 to 59,975 in 1881.⁹ This substantial inward migration of rural Catholics seeking work in former Protestant domains caused competition for jobs which, when set against a backdrop of national political and religious movements, 'did not serve to knit together a stable community'.¹⁰ Such resultant strains were not unknown in other Irish towns, but 'in the case of Belfast these tensions were to prove in every way sharper, more persistent and more divisive than anywhere else'.¹¹ As both communities lived cheek by jowl, but in entirely separate and precisely defined areas, the sectarianism brought from the surrounding

⁸ I. Budge and C. O'Leary, *Belfast: Approach to Crisis. A Study of Belfast Politics 1613-1970* (London, 1973), p.32.

⁹ W.A. Maguire, *Belfast* (Keele, 1993), p.69 and *Belfast Riots Commission 1886, Report of the Belfast Riots Commissioners Minutes of Evidence and Appendix* [C.4925], H.C. 1887, xviii, 1, p.5.

¹⁰ Budge and O' Leary, *Belfast: Approach to Crisis*, p.75.

¹¹ Maguire, *Belfast*, p.31.

countryside festered and exploded in increasingly bitter inter-communal riots.

By 1886 the “seismic areas” of Belfast were located at the Brickfields and Springfield, a “no-man’s-land” between the two quarters of West Belfast: the Catholic Falls Road and the Protestant Shankill Road. Although riots later sometimes radiated outwards to other areas, these were the main “battlegrounds”.

Prior to 1 September 1865 Belfast Town Council had maintained its own small town police force (nicknamed the “Bulkies” on account of their capes or girth!) which policed within the town boundary. The Irish Constabulary policed outside that boundary but was frequently ordered to assist the local police when riots occurred within the town. The local force was perceived by some as inefficient and a commission of inquiry into the Belfast riots of 1857 suggested:

in the constitution of the present force there are serious errors, calling for immediate remedy;....that a total change should be effected in the mode of appointment and the management of the local police of Belfast.¹²

In addition to charges of inefficiency, the town police were accused of sectarianism and the Inquiry Commissioners too broached this subject:

The police force are, with six or seven exceptions, entirely Protestant, and those in any command amongst them are exclusively so; a great many of them are, or have been, Orangemen - two of them actually walked with an Orange procession.... and the public feeling as to them is unmistakable and palpable....

¹² *Report of the Commissioners of Inquiry into the Origin and Character of the Riots in Belfast in July and September 1857; together with the Minutes of Evidence and Appendix*, H.C. 1857-8 (2309), xxvi, 1, p.5. For a full account of the Belfast borough police see B. Griffin, *The Bulkies: Police and Crime in Belfast, 1800-1865* (Dublin, 1997).

They have besides other employments, in aid of the collection of taxes and otherwise, in which there was at least room to impute to them partisanship, and an unfair leaning towards the corporate body.... upon which they are dependent.¹³

Belfast Town Council made attempts to restructure and improve the force. These measures included seeking advice from the London Metropolitan Police and appointing an ex - army officer, Captain Eyre Massey Shaw, to oversee the changes and act as Superintendent of the town police. It would seem however, that the changes wrought were ineffectual because by 1861, in the wake of charges of police brutality, a local newspaper printed the following:

like Paddy Brennan's barn, "the old rat" is about the Police Office still and....the gallant captain will never be able to root him out of it until you get constabulary like to Cork, Waterford and Limerick. You will then have a body of men among whom thoroughbred miscreants will be the exception, and not the rule.¹⁴

On 3 September 1861 the Town Police Committee Chairman admitted that 'the constables had used their sticks or batons most unwarrantably on innocent persons'.¹⁵ But aside from issuing the force with collar numbers to aid identification, the Council did little to alleviate public concerns. Privately, members of the Irish Constabulary shared the disquiet felt by many in Belfast and one officer remarked later: 'At this time there was a local force in Belfast.... who were almost all Orangemen, so that the Catholics, who formed a fourth of the whole population, had

¹³ *Report of the Commissioners of Inquiry, 1857*, pp.4-5.

¹⁴ *NW*, 5 August 1861.

¹⁵ *Belfast Newsletter* (hereafter *BNL*), 17 August and 3 September 1861.

little confidence in it'.¹⁶

Following the extensive riots in Belfast during August 1864, similar criticisms of the town police were once again aired by the subsequent riot inquiry and it recommended the force's abolition.¹⁷ Chief Secretary Robert Peel concurred and, in a letter to his Under Secretary, wrote: 'I quite agree with your remark that it would be far better for the town if the rubbishing local police were replaced by our more efficient constabulary'.¹⁸ The fate of the "bulkies" was sealed and despite protestations from Belfast Town Council of 'the manifest injustice of disbanding the entire of the present force',¹⁹ parliament passed the Constabulary (Ireland) Amendment Act, 1865 (28 & 29 Vict. c.70.) and the town police were abolished.

Shortly after the riots the Irish Constabulary had examined different ways in which Belfast could be policed and recommended that it take over policing reminding government that:

It is of great importance to keep in mind that no Police Force can ever be long or really efficient, unless there be the means of preventing its becoming too much localised, and if this be true as a general rule, it is especially to be observed in

¹⁶ Sir Andrew Reed, *Recollection of my Life* (1911), p.31. 123 page typescript in the possession of Reed's grandson. Microfilm copy in the possession of Professor E.L. Malcolm, University of Melbourne.

¹⁷ *Report of the Commissioners of Inquiry, 1864, respecting the Magisterial and Police jurisdiction, arrangements and establishment of the Borough of Belfast* [3466], H.C. 1865, xxviii.

¹⁸ Letter from Chief Secretary to Under Secretary, 19 August 1864, Larcom Papers, National Library of Ireland, Dublin (hereafter N.L.I.), MS 7626.

¹⁹ *Belfast Corporation Police Committee Minute Book*, 11th May 1865, Belfast City Hall.

such a case as that of Belfast.²⁰

With its system of frequent transfers the Constabulary felt it was best placed to stop such “localisation” and where it had been policing urban areas the Irish Constabulary had indeed gained a measure of respect.²¹ Therefore not unnaturally, the government was keen to replicate a successful formula by replacing the Belfast local police with the Constabulary. The initial strength of the force was set at 130, wholly chargeable upon the Consolidated Fund controlled by government. This so called “free force” was supplemented by a separate “extra force” of 320 men, half the cost of which was to be paid by the borough. The 450 strong constabulary responsible for Belfast from 1865 was neither local nor denominationally exclusive.

The first street patrols of the R.I.C. on 1 September 1865 marked the end of municipal control of policing in more ways than one; they also marked the end of the use of special constables. The first employment of special constables in Belfast had been on 16 May 1812 when a voluntary watch was established.²² Although this and other Belfast watches were replaced by the paid town police, the practice of local magistrates calling for special constables in time of civic need continued. However, this practice reached its nadir during the 1864 riots when some 300 special constables were sworn in on 15 August. One commentator described these special constables as ‘well-set-up young men.... armed with batons [who] patrolled the

²⁰ ‘Memorandum on the reconstruction of the Police of Belfast’, 24 September 1864, author unknown (Larcom Papers, N.L.I., MS 7631).

²¹ *Freeman's Journal* (hereafter *FJ*) 11 October 1860.

²² Griffin, *The Bulkies*, p.11.

streets in force every night',²³ implying that their behaviour was benign. However, Sybil Baker has characterised them as 'Protestant desperadoes'²⁴ and that would seem to be the more accurate description. Catholic residents of Belfast remembered the 'disastrous results' of the deployment of special constables, whereas Protestant residents believed the 'few people [who] received knocks' worth the price of restoring order.²⁵ A street ballad²⁶ which reveals the sectarian nature of the Belfast Specials and the violence they employed, appears to add substance to the mainly anecdotal evidence²⁷ that the use of these specials was, as one R.I.C. officer put it, a 'system.... that broke down utterly'.²⁸

Although that officer may have been displaying some small measure of traditional and professional antipathy towards the role of the unpaid amateur policeman, nevertheless, when asked if such constables could be usefully employed for the preservation of the peace, the District Inspector replied: 'I think if there were twenty of each side to act as special constables, I think in that event they might have a fight between themselves'.²⁹ His reply encapsulated the dilemma facing Belfast's civic authorities: if one only raised special constables from a single part of the community, the danger was that they would act in a prejudicial manner; if drawn from both sides, that they would attack each other. Although an inquiry was conducted into the use of

²³ Moore, *The Truth about Ulster*, p.33.

²⁴ S.E. Baker, 'Orange and Green: Belfast 1832-1912' in H.J. Dyos and M. Wolff (eds.), *The Victorian City: Image and Reality* (London, 1973), ii, p.805.

²⁵ *BNL*, 7 August and 9 August 1886.

²⁶ See Appendix One.

²⁷ *Belfast Riots Commission 1886, Minutes of Evidence*, p.298. The date stated by the witness in his evidence is incorrect.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.120.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

special constables for Belfast in 1872, the R.I.C. were opposed to the idea and were even against the Town Inspector having the power to enrol and organise specials. As the Inspector General Andrew Reed, later remarked: ‘I think until we arrive at the happy period when the wolf will lie down with the lamb in Belfast, I think it would be useless and dangerous to invest the Town Inspector with any such power’.³⁰ There was unanimity in belief between the police and the council that special constables could not work in Belfast and it was a view shared by Dublin Castle. As Chief Secretary W.E. Forster subsequently bemoaned: ‘In the south and west we cannot get them, and in the north, Orangemen would offer themselves, and we should probably have to put a policeman by the side of every special to keep him in order’.³¹

Perhaps Forster’s analysis was a little simplistic, since cross-community special constables had worked effectively in Londonderry at election time during the late 1860s and 1870s.³² But, as Stanley Palmer contends, as a system of regularised civic support, the special constabulary ‘never proved workable in Ireland’.³³ In Belfast, after 1864, it was ‘an experiment so disastrous that local magistrates would not risk repeating it’.³⁴ The abolition of the town police and the ‘specials’ in 1865 unquestionably weakened local control of Belfast policing.

From the outset the relationship between the Council and the Constabulary was an

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.243.

³¹ T. Wemyess Reid, *Life of the Right Honourable William Edward Forster* (London, 1888), p.350.

³² Memorandum from H. Keogh R.M. to Under Secretary (National Archives, Ireland (hereafter N.A.I.), C.S.O., R.P., 1872/1022).

³³ S.H. Palmer, *Police and Protest in England and Ireland 1780-1850* (Cambridge, 1988), p.535.

³⁴ S.E. Baker, ‘Orange and Green’, p.805.

uneasy one and implicit in its Police Committee Minute Books ³⁵ is that the Council's loss of control and influence over policing matters became a running sore.³⁶ The Protestant and Unionist Council criticised by the 1864 riot commissioners for its 'exclusive [Protestant] character',³⁷ regarded Dublin Castle as now being firmly in control and resented its perceived impotence. Some rate-conscious local worthies believed that their having to contribute towards a police they did not manage was tantamount to a punishment by the Nationalists within the Castle, given that Waterford, Cork and Limerick were exempt from such costs. This was, however, a flawed analysis. It simply reflected Belfast's greater ability to pay than the other cities and anyway the systematic replacement of Unionist and Protestant civil servants by Catholic and Nationalists within the Irish civil administration, the so called "greening of Dublin Castle", did not begin until 1892.³⁸ What also troubled many ratepayers was the Constabulary's semi-military ethos which they believed impeded civic policing and highlighted 'the entire unfitness of the Constabulary to act as a Night Watch in a Town like Belfast'.³⁹ The situation did

³⁵ Examples abound but the minute books for the 1883-1892 period demonstrate that during the appalling riots of 1886 the Council were more concerned with petty "sniping" at the R.I.C. over accounting matters than with the state of the town. The entry for 5 August is a classic example of "fiddling while Rome burns"!

³⁶ This was not unique to Belfast; Londonderry Corporation had a similar rancorous association with the new R.I.C. when its borough police was abolished. See M. Radford, *The Bang Beggars of Derry City: Borough Policing in Londonderry, c1832-1870* (Londonderry, forthcoming).

³⁷ *Report of the Commissioners of Inquiry, 1864*, p.6.

³⁸ L.W. McBride, *The Greening of Dublin Castle. The Transformation of Bureaucratic and Judicial Personnel in Ireland, 1832-1922* (Washington, 1991), p.39.

³⁹ Belfast Corporation Police Committee Minute Book, 11th May 1865, Belfast City Hall.

not improve with time either, as one councillor protested in 1901: ‘the work of the police in connection with the protection of house property [is] a farce.... to send them to Belfast as a civic force was nonsense’.⁴⁰

This deprivation of local control seemed to upset all levels of the Protestant community: *The Belfast Newsletter* referred to the ‘green badge of disgrace [and claimed the new policemen] were by no means civil’.⁴¹ Prisoners in custody abused the constabulary for being, ‘a Popish force, a bloody lot of Fenians [and later] Popish brats’⁴² in the mistaken belief, perhaps, that the Belfast force consisted solely of Catholic policemen. It was an erroneous charge because the Constabulary authorities were concerned from the outset to have some ‘slight proportion of Protestants more than Roman Catholics’ to mirror the city’s denominational mix.⁴³ This public perception of an imposed centralised force served to make the Constabulary seem remote from the majority Protestant population.

In his pioneering article on policing, R.D. Storch said:

the imposition of the police brought the arm of municipal and state authority directly to bear upon key institutions of daily life in working-class neighbourhoods, touching off a running battle with local custom and popular culture which lasted at least until the end of the century. [They were] an alien element in the community and a daily source of both major and petty

⁴⁰ *The Irish News* (hereafter *IN*) 5 July 1901.

⁴¹ *BNL*, 9 September 1865.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 14 April 1865 and 13 January 1880.

⁴³ *Belfast Riots Commission 1886, Minutes of Evidence*, p.23.

annoyance.⁴⁴

Storch's analysis of policing mid-Victorian Northern England can, in this context, be almost entirely transposed to the R.I.C.'s policing of Belfast, with the added *frisson* of sectarian hatred against the force. The Belfast police, were, as one Londonderry M.P. put it, 'the natural foe' of the working-class Belfast populace.⁴⁵ One easily quantifiable measure of their unpopularity in these areas was the 'very frequent' incidence of crowd rescue attempts of police prisoners.⁴⁶ Another, perhaps, is the ferocity with which R.I.C. men were treated by the mob during riots; the 1886 and 1898 disorders were particularly noted for their high police casualties.

Whilst the force's replacement of the "Bulkies" was in the nature of a relief to Catholics and a source of resentment to Protestants, the "honeymoon" between Catholics and policeman was not an enduring one. As the R.I.C.'s intervention in popular pastimes cut across the city's religious divide, it was not long before local newspapers carried anti-R.I.C. epithets uttered by Catholic traversers and it became evident it was really the force presence, *per se*, that irked both communities. It was, however, the riots of 1886, which crystallised and particularised Protestant venom for the force. During these riots a large proportion of those killed by police rifle fire were Protestant, some of whom were completely innocent of rioting, and, the hatred engendered by R.I.C. activity at that time guaranteed a legacy of Protestant

⁴⁴ R.D. Storch, 'The Policeman as Domestic Missionary: Urban Discipline and Popular Culture in Northern England, 1850-1880', *Journal of Social History*, ix (1976), pp. 481 and 493.

⁴⁵ *Hansard 4*, Volume LVIII, 18 May to 10 June 1898, p.1213, Mr. Vesey Knox.

⁴⁶ B.J. Griffin, 'The Irish Police, 1836-1914: A Social History' (unpublished PhD. dissertation, Loyola University of Chicago, 1990), p.700.

animosity.

The divergence between the Constabulary and many Belfast citizens was also exacerbated by public awareness of the police system of transferring men into and out of Belfast for various reasons such as promotion and marriage, a practice which they contended was detrimental to the town.⁴⁷ The number of policemen now within their boundaries compounded this hostile view of being policed by strangers who had no long-term commitment to Belfast. Belfast's police force almost trebled from the 200 borough policemen in 1864 and by 1886 Belfast had one R.I.C. man per 337 inhabitants, making it one of the most intensively policed cities in the United Kingdom.⁴⁸

Whilst the police authority did not deem it necessary to reduce the town force numbers, it did make efforts to "localise" the Constabulary by minimising transfers and issuing police collar numbers as a measure of local accountability. Therefore, by 1886, the R.I.C. in Belfast had become something of a 'stationary force' of experienced policemen who had generally volunteered to serve in the town.⁴⁹ But, despite the R.I.C.'s efforts to ameliorate these image difficulties, the gap between the police and people rarely closed, and this divergence was often particularly marked in the case of Belfast's leading citizens.

Much of the rancour was usually confined to the privacy of their respective corridors of power, but in 1896 these tensions became very public. On 29 July the

⁴⁷ *NW*, 3 September 1900 and *IN*, 5 July 1901.

⁴⁸ *Belfast Riots Commission 1886, Minutes of Evidence*, p.240.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p.551. In September 1885 the Inspector General Andrew Reed stipulated that men stationed in the town must be volunteers only, with at least three years' previous service.

Commissioner of Police, T. Moriarty, reported to the Inspector General that a nationalist demonstration in Belfast on 17 August was liable to cause a disturbance. On 13 August the Under Secretary and the Inspector General instructed Moriarty to write to the Mayor, William Pirrie, and request that he return from his holiday in Scotland. Meanwhile, the Under Secretary asked two Resident Magistrates (R.M.s) to proceed to the city on 15 August. Moriarty failed to notify the Mayor believing (correctly) that the ex - Lord Mayor, Sir W. McCammond, had been acting in *locum tenens* for the Mayor and had therefore kept the Mayor fully informed. Pirrie returned to Belfast on 16 August and angrily telegraphed the Under Secretary asking: 'on whose request and information Resident Magistrates have been sent down to take duty in Belfast without consultation with Local Authorities, and under whom these Magistrates are to act'.⁵⁰ The Under Secretary pointedly replied that it was both the government's 'usual practice [to send the magistrates and that] the details of duty.... are usually arranged by the Commissioner of Police'.⁵¹

In the event a minor riot did ensue on 17 August, but police action in re-routing the parade prevented this becoming serious, and 'all the papers agree [d] in eulogising the Police arrangements - and the conduct of the police generally'.⁵² As a result it would seem that Moriarty and the government's actions were vindicated. In an annex to a secret memorandum to the Inspector General, Moriarty castigated the Mayor for his opposition to the re-routing and derided the City Magistrates who

⁵⁰ Telegram from Lord Mayor to Under Secretary in *Precis*, n.d. (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1912/11935).

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Report from E.Seddall D.I to Commissioner, 18 August 1896 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1912/4273).

'gave no assistance in dealing with the disturbances'.⁵³ However, to calm troubled waters, Moriarty was forced by the Inspector General to explain his 'technical error'⁵⁴(in not personally writing to the Mayor) at a meeting with Pirrie. Although Pirrie accepted Moriarty's explanation, he was not mollified and sent a number of telegrams and letters to the government complaining:

that Resident Magistrates had been sent to Belfast without consulting him and his brother magistrates, and that such Resident Magistrates did not "report" their arrival to him, and that the late Commissioner was removed and the new Commissioner [Moriarty] appointed without any official notification being made to the Local Authorities [and he finished his correspondence by saying that these] were acts of official impoliteness and discourtesy.⁵⁵

The government's tart reply asserted the administration's right to send R.M.s to the city as it saw fit and stated that the magistrates were under no obligation to "report" to the Mayor. Moreover it stated that 'it would be quite inconsistent with the discipline and good government of the Force to consult and be advised by local authorities as to the services of individual members of the Force'.⁵⁶ In his parting

⁵³ Memorandum from E. Seddall to Inspector General, 21 August 1896 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1912/14673).

⁵⁴ Letter from T. Moriarty to Chief Secretary, 20 August 1896 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1912/11935). Moriarty was subsequently disciplined (without record) by the Inspector General Andrew Reed, although it is clear from the evidence of the interview that Reed fully supported the Commissioner's absolute right to independent action providing that the Mayor was kept informed, Memorandum from A. Reed to Chief Secretary, 8 September 1896 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1912/11935).

⁵⁵ Telegram from Lord Mayor to Under Secretary in Precis, n.d. (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1912/11935).

⁵⁶ Letter from Under Secretary to the Lord Mayor, 20 August 1896 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1912/11935).

salvo the Mayor's somewhat petulant rejoinder dismissed the executive, remarking:

Personally it matters little to me that the Lord Mayor and Chief Magistrates of this City should be overlooked by the Government but the Citizens will not submit, without at least drawing public attention to the omission, to be treated as though they had no interest in their own affairs.⁵⁷

During this exchange of correspondence, the Mayor called an extraordinary meeting of the Council at 'two hours notice' during which he vented his anger regarding the government's stance and made public some of the correspondence.⁵⁸ The press fed hungrily on such juicy morsels and quickly the Nationalist and Unionist newspapers sided firmly with either rival camp. *The Belfast Evening Telegraph* in a lengthy editorial supported the Mayor and magistracy, deprecated the despatch of the R.M.s, sharply condemned the government and obliquely criticised the Commissioner.⁵⁹ Conversely, the Nationalist *Irish News* railed against the partisan council, commended the independence of the police and the government, stating the latter to have been 'well advised in sending down stipendiary magistrates'.⁶⁰

What had begun as a private spat became a very public dispute and was almost certainly the defining moment in relations between the executive and Belfast Council on the matter of policing. In 1864 antagonisms between the Council and the police were aired in the confines of a meeting of the constabulary and magistracy,

⁵⁷ Letter from Lord Mayor to the Under Secretary, 21 August 1896 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1912/11935).

⁵⁸ *The Irish Independent*, 18 August 1896.

⁵⁹ *Belfast Evening Telegraph*, (hereafter *BET*) 20 August 1896.

⁶⁰ *IN*, 21 August 1896.

while in 1872 the Council exercised a degree of circumspection in tackling the government with its differing vision of how the town should be policed. In 1896 no such limitations existed in the Council's endeavour to put their case across. From 1865 onwards Belfast Council and Dublin Castle were effectively at loggerheads over the best methods of policing, with the police in the middle. The imbroglio of 1896 served to make their differences an extremely public affair.

Relations were little better two years later when the police and city fathers began their security preparations for the large Nationalist demonstration commemorating the centenary of the 1798 rising. Following abortive negotiations with the Mayor, the Commissioner penned a confidential memorandum to the Inspector General detailing his conversations with the Mayor:

I explained to him the seriousness of the position.... but to no effect.... he [the Mayor] objected to bringing out military until rioting actually commenced.... I must confess that I feel my position acutely handicapped as I am by being placed at the mercy of a Lord Mayor who cannot realize the gravity of the position.... and a few City Magistrates all at logger heads with each other. There is no possibility of getting the smallest approval to a representative meeting of magistrates here. ⁶¹

The animosity was however mutual and, after earlier complaining that 'we need not expect much assistance from Head Quarters', the Mayor, James Henderson said: 'Do not hamper us with "Superior Officers", or more Police'⁶² - sparking another set of

⁶¹ Confidential Memorandum from T. Moriarty to Inspector General, 1 June 1898 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1912/11935).

⁶² Letters from James Henderson to Sir David Harrel, 21 May and 3 June 1898 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1912/11935/9202/1).

disputatious exchanges between Belfast's leading citizen and the government.

Once again Moriarty's pessimism with regard to the outcome was confirmed and serious rioting broke out on 6 June. The rioting in the wake of the 98 Demonstration was noted for its savagery, and one senior policeman summed it up thus:

I have only to add that I never before saw anything to compare in seriousness with this riot - and the murderous cruelty of the crowd, especially where they could get an isolated or a wounded Policeman can hardly be described.⁶³

But neither the savagery of the crowd nor Moriarty's rectitude influenced the Lord Mayor who seemed determined at all events to either embarrass Moriarty or thwart his attempts to control the situation adequately. On one occasion Henderson asked Moriarty to 'withdraw the police from the streets [to enable the military to] restore order', but, paradoxically, on another occasion objected to Moriarty's proposed employment of soldiers instead of police 'on the ground it would cause excitement amongst the people'.⁶⁴ Henderson later complained to the newspapers 'that the Protestants were much exasperated by a party of Mounted Police who rode up the Shankhill'.⁶⁵

Once the riots had occurred there was little the government could do, but the Under Secretary summed up the 'imperfect preparations [by remarking] We are unfortunate in having as Lord Mayor a gentleman whose judgement and action do

⁶³ 98 Demonstration in Belfast and Subsequent Rioting, Report by E. Seddall D.I., 7 June 1898 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1912/11935).

⁶⁴ Rioting on the Shankhill Road, Report by T. Moriarty, 7 June 1898 and letter from Under Secretary to Chief Secretary, 7 June 1898 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1912/11935).

⁶⁵ 'The Action of the Mounted Men on Shankhill Road on the evening of the 6th June', Report by E. Seddall D.I., 12 June 1898 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1912/10163).

not appear to be equal to a critical situation'.⁶⁶ It was an intolerable situation that did not appear to be ameliorated by the passage of time. In 1900 the city's leading citizen and his magistracy apparently 'refused advice from the police and took a perverse delight in demonstrating that only they and the military could control the town'.⁶⁷ By 1912 this discontent exploded with the Council's outrage at having to pay for an extra 200 policemen who had been allocated by Dublin Castle.

In July the Council had been told that these men were to be assigned to Belfast because of an increase in the area and population of the city. The Council protested at this imposition mainly because they were expected to pay for the increase. The Council argued that the additional force should be part of the so-called "Free Quota" or Free Force, the payment for which came from the Imperial exchequer. The Council had always paid a proportion of the costs of the extra force and in fact that amount had decreased in recent years,⁶⁸ nevertheless the Council chafed under what they considered to be an unfair burden. Councillors continued in their belief that they were being victimised by a pro-Nationalist executive. One councillor asked: 'was Belfast to be practically a besieged city, completely dominated and controlled from Dublin without any let or hindrance?'⁶⁹ What followed was a conflict between the Council and the government conducted by delegation and post that was to lead to a

⁶⁶ Letter from Under Secretary to Chief Secretary, 8 June 1898 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1912/11935).

⁶⁷ Quoted from S.E. Baker, 'Orange and Green', p.806, using source (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P. 1901/13517), which is not currently extant.

⁶⁸ In 1890 the Council contributed 20% (£14,105) of the total cost of the R.I.C., in 1900 it was 76% (£16,408, 1905, 91% (£20,748), and 1911, 42% (£20,778), *IN*, 3 December 1912.

⁶⁹ *IN*, 3 December 1912.

complete refusal to pay. The government retaliated by stopping Belfast's funding from the government-controlled Local Taxation Grant, and the dispute eventually ended up in court in 1918. The Council finally agreed to pay a proportion of the outstanding sum. The hostility did not end there and in 1922 the Council acted against the government and the R.I.C. in similar circumstances, the Council ultimately being forced to pay £58,436 16s. 8d. of a £70,000 debt owed to government.⁷⁰

The historic dissonance between the Belfast City Council and the R.I.C. had profound implications for the force's policing of Belfast. From the beginning of its tenure in Belfast the R.I.C. were beset with practical difficulties arising from this dissonance. Belfast's magistrates had operational control of police parties in riot situations. Frequently castigated as being inefficient themselves at such times,⁷¹ they were often the bitterest critics of the R.I.C. This could not have aided their working relationship. By the same token as the Mayor was responsible for applying to government for extra troops in times of riot, a good liaison between the police and the mayoral office was important. If such applications were not sent expeditiously, as was often the case, then the failure for the containment of the riot generally rebounded on the police. Such failures that there were, and the knowledge that the civic authorities did not support them, must have had a detrimental effect on the town policemen's morale.

⁷⁰ *The Belfast Book; Local Government in the City and County Borough of Belfast* (Belfast, 1929), pp.156-8.

⁷¹ *The Times*, 23 August 1872, see also *Report of the Belfast Riot Commissioners*, pp. 19-20.

In the matter of ordinary crime, (as opposed to riot) the Council was notorious for insisting that the minutiae of the Borough bye-laws were adhered to and they were determined that the R.I.C should root out the miscreants no matter how trifling the offence. Such an officious attitude by the Council must have been exasperating to a force that was well aware of how the pursuing of such minor infringements could ignite mob mayhem. That the Council continued to insist that the police follow up these trivialities throughout our period, shows how little the Council was aware of the operational ramifications of such obtrusive policies or how little they cared. Equally, the R.I.C.'s reluctance to prosecute the many minor offences that were brought to their attention, because of the volatility of the town, must have been galling to many Councillors and increased their dislike of the force.

Throughout, it is clear that the R.I.C. attempted to be receptive to the Council's wishes and they adopted strategies to placate those demands. Sometimes these strategies were to the detriment of the force, as we shall see in Chapter VI. However, whatever was done was never enough in the Council's eyes and it was obvious that there was always a sub-text to the Council agenda, which as Andrew Reed noted in his memoirs, was the replacement of the constabulary with a "Bulkie" *redivivus*.⁷² If the R.I.C. could not rely, at all times, on the support of the city's administration and its leading citizens, and it plainly could not, how could it hope to contain Belfast's turbulent lower classes? The omens were not good.

⁷² Sir Andrew Reed, *Recollection*, p.93.



Map One: Detail of Belfast, 1887. Numbered locations are R.I.C. barracks. Source: *Belfast Riots Commission 1886, Report of the Belfast Riots Commissioners Minutes of Evidence and Appendix* [C.4925], H.C. 1887, xviii, 1.

CHAPTER II

BLACK ENAMELLED PEELERS

Belfast policemen were once noted for their highly buffed black leather equipment and received the sobriquet 'Black enamelled peelers', but what constituted a typical Belfast 'peeler'? This chapter aims to answer that question and to examine in turn structure, duties, recruiting patterns and turnover rates, promotion, discipline, marriage, together with aspects of barrack life. A statistical analysis of the Belfast policeman is also included in an attempt to discover if the profile of the constabulary man serving in Belfast matched that of his counterpart in the rest of Ireland.

The strength of the R.I.C. ordinarily stationed in Belfast at the beginning of our period was 462 officers and men divided between twenty-five stations in four police districts.¹ These stations were situated at the following locations in the town: Albert Crescent, Ballymacarrett, Ballynafeigh, Bond Street, Botanic Road, Boyne Bridge, Cupar Street, Dock Street, Donegal Street, Falls Road, Glengall Street, Great Georges Street, Hercules Street, Peters-Hill, Renwick-Place, Shankill and York Road. Additionally there were two stations in Crumlin-Road and Divis Street and three stations in Queens Street. Some of these stations namely, Cupar Street, Great Georges Street, Renwick-Place, Shankill and one each at Divis Street, Crumlin Road and Queens Street, appear in the *Royal Irish Constabulary List*² as Temporary Stations which were established for either operational or administrative reasons and

¹ The overall strength of the R.I.C. at the time was 12,736 all ranks. B.J.Griffin, 'The Irish Police, 1836-1914: A Social History' (unpublished PhD. dissertation, Loyola University of Chicago, 1990) p.402.

² *Royal Irish Constabulary List and Directory* (Dublin, 1870), pp. 95-125.

were discontinued once the need for them ceased.

Although the strength of the Belfast R.I.C. grew, if somewhat erratically, between 1870 and 1914, the number of stations varied through time in line with the operational requirements of the force. For example, whereas the force had twenty-nine stations in 1888, this had shrunk to nineteen stations by 1894. Reflecting the extension of Belfast's municipal boundaries in 1895, the R.I.C. increased the number of police districts to five in 1897, eventually increasing that to six by 1914. In 1886 the force consisted of four District Inspectors, eleven Head Constables and 588 sergeants and constables, all under the overall command of a County Inspector known as the Town Inspector of Constabulary.³ This number increased to 947 in 1898 and according to the Inspector General, grew by 100 men in June 1902 and by another 200 men in August 1912.⁴

In 1914 the Belfast force consisted of one Senior County Inspector, now titled the Commissioner of Police and Town Inspector of Constabulary, seven District Inspectors, twenty-eight Head Constables, 141 sergeants, fifty-one acting sergeants, and 1,041 constables. These men 'practically represent [ed] above a ninth of the

³ *Report by One of the Commissioners of Inquiry, 1886, respecting the Origin and Circumstances of the Riots in Belfast, in June, August, and September, 1886, and the action taken thereon by the authorities: Also in regard to the magisterial and police jurisdiction, arrangements, and establishment for the borough of Belfast.* [3029], H.C. and H.L. 1887, p.7.

⁴ *Hansard 4, Volume CXIII, 23 October 1902, Mr. Wyndham, p.599 and E.T.Seddall, Belfast Police Manual. Compiled for the Use of the Royal Irish Constabulary Serving in the Town of Belfast* (2nd ed., Belfast, 1898), p.10 and *Royal Irish Constabulary and Dublin Metropolitan Police. Appendix to Report of the Committee of Enquiry, 1914, Containing Minutes of Evidence with Appendices*, [C7637], H.C. 1914-16, xxxii, 359, p.93.

entire Royal Irish Constabulary in Ireland' at that time.⁵ The force had its headquarters in the Belfast city municipal buildings and was distributed amongst six police districts - A District: Musgrave Street (the central station), College Square, Smithfield, B District: Springfield Road, Andersonstown, Brickfields, Cullingtree Road, C District: Brown Square, Antrim Road, Craven Street, Leopold Street, Ligoniel, Shankill Road, D District: Glenravel Street, Chichester Road, Greencastle, Henry Street, York Road, E District: Mountpottinger, Ballyhackamore, Newtownards Road, Strandtown, and F District: Donegall Pass, Ballynafeigh, Lisburn Road and Roden Street.⁶ The number of men in each station varied considerably: in 1906 for example, Mountpottinger contained 113 men whereas Ligoniel contained just twelve.⁷

One Belfast sub-constable complained to the 1872 Enquiry commissioners that, 'one of the great grievances of the constabulary [was] that the men are always on duty - Sunday and every other day'.⁸ Although Head and other constables were granted one month's leave per year, it was made clear by the authorities that this was an indulgence and that, when on leave, they were 'to consider themselves subject to every order, rule, and regulation of the force, and as liable to the consequences of any breach of discipline or good order as if they were serving at their proper

⁵ *Royal Irish Constabulary and Dublin Metropolitan Police. Appendix to Report of the Committee of Enquiry, 1914*, p.93.

⁶ *Royal Irish Constabulary List and Directory* (Dublin, 1914), p.99.

⁷ *Appendix to Report of the Belfast Police Commission, 1906* (N.A.I., S.P.O., Misc. and Official Papers, 1876-1922, Parcel 6), p.2.

⁸ *Report of the Commissioners appointed by the Lord Commissioners of Her Majesty's Treasury to enquire into the condition of the Civil Service in Ireland on the Royal Irish Constabulary: Together with the Minutes of Evidence and Appendix* [C 831], H.C. and H.L. 1873, xxii, 131, p.42.

stations'.⁹ Duty, therefore, was the watchword of the Belfast constabulary man's life. What then was his routine?

Belfast's police districts were divided into sub-districts and each sub-district was divided into beats, which became the primary concern of the Belfast policeman while on ordinary duty. Beat duty at night was known as the 'Night Watch' and policemen were also employed at fixed points throughout Belfast for the regulation of traffic, or for 'protection duty,' interposing themselves between Belfast's two communities at potential flashpoints. Obviously the routine was matched to the exigencies of the service, but there were general constants and the normal twenty-four-hour tour of duty would consist of a 1st Day Division which would employ one-sixth of the beat-duty force on six hour's duty from 6:00am to 9:00am and 3:00pm to 6:00pm. A 2nd Day Division would employ one-sixth of the beat-men on six hour's duty from 9:00am to 3:00pm, and an Evening Division employed one-third of the force for five hour's duty from 6:00pm to 11:00pm. The 'Night Watch' or Night Division was a seven hour duty for which the men were paid an extra sixpence per night. This duty lasted from 11:00pm until 6:00am. The day beat men exchanged the 1st and 2nd Division daily and the entire beat force was rotated monthly, with the night division becoming the evening division and the evening division becoming the day division; the former day divisions becoming the night division. It was calculated that the average beat duty performed by each man was six hours in every twenty-four. Each beat was worked singly during the day and in pairs for the evening and

⁹ *Standing Rules and Regulations for the Government and Guidance of the Royal Irish Constabulary* (4th ed., Dublin, 1888), p.29.

night divisions, with each man proceeding on his beat 'at a pace of about two and a half miles an hour'.¹⁰ Prior to 1901 there were ninety-five separate beats, however in consultation with the Council, the force divided the beats and created 175 beats, all of which were worked singly day and night. The Head Constable in each area had the discretion to increase these beats to two-man duties in disorderly localities or at times of heightened tension.

Each division was paraded and inspected half an hour before commencement of duty and those not on duty were paraded and inspected at morning parade which took place at 9:00am in the summer and 10:00am in the winter. A roll call took place at 10:00pm every evening and all off-duty men, whether married or single, were obliged to attend and to remain in their barracks or lodgings thereafter.¹¹ The number of men not on beat duty and performing other secondary tasks at any one time was considerable and one District Inspector complained that: 'They are so occupied that there is seldom the proper number available for the amount of beats'.¹² This was plain speaking and highlighted wasteful practices within the Belfast R.I.C. The

¹⁰ *Report by One of the Commissioners of Inquiry, 1886*, p.53 and C.E.A. Cameron, *Belfast Police Manual. Compiled for the Use of the Royal Irish Constabulary Serving in the Town of Belfast* (1st ed., Belfast, 1888), p.45.

¹¹ C.E.A. Cameron, *Belfast Police Manual*, p.16 and *Standing Rules and Regulations for the Government and Guidance of the Royal Irish Constabulary*, p.68.

¹² *Belfast Riots Commission 1886, Report of the Belfast Riots Commissioners, Minutes of Evidence and Appendix* [C 4925], H.C. 1887, xviii, 1, p.104. These comments later formed part of an unfavourable record for the officer concerned, D.I. William Grene, who was censured by the R.I.C. for 'discreditable contradictory testimony before Belfast Riots Commission', Royal Irish Constabulary officers register 1817-1914, vols i-iii: (Public Record Office, London (hereafter P.R.O.(L), H.O., 184/45-47). D.I. Grene was also effectively made a scapegoat for his part in the 1886 riots and doubtless his remarks at the Commission inquiry did not endear him to R.I.C. Headquarters either.

Belfast Riots Commissioners, to whom the complaint was made, estimated that in addition to the 408 men on beat and active watching duties

27 were engaged on incidental or casual duties, 85 were expended on inactive duties, 81 were recorded ineffective and short of complement and 7 (including 2 members of the town force) were then apparently on the staff of the divisional magistrate.¹³

One commissioner noted 'that the existing arrangements of duties [was] defective and the source of much inefficiency'.¹⁴ The employment of men on 'inactive duties,' such as barrack orderlies and barrack mess men, emphasised the semi-military characteristics of the Belfast R.I.C.. This was common, however, throughout the force, but clearly not in keeping with the benign model of civil policing that the Commissioners felt should be the Belfast R.I.C.'s exemplar.

Prior to 1885 policemen could be posted to Belfast through a variety of routes, either straight from the Depot as newly-qualified policemen, as volunteers, or merely at the behest of the R.I.C. authorities. It was not permitted for a man to serve in the county where he was born or where he last resided and, in compliance with this R.I.C. policy, men serving in Belfast could not be natives of the city or the surrounding county. In the case of Belfast this was a somewhat redundant stipulation because men from the city were reluctant to join the R.I.C. and evidence also shows low recruitment levels in the counties surrounding the city.¹⁵ Shortly after Andrew

¹³ *Report by One of the Commissioners of Inquiry, 1886*, p.53.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ I.R. Bridgeman, 'Policing Rural Ireland: A Study of the Origins, Development and Role of the Irish Constabulary, and its Impact on Crime Prevention and Detection in

Reed's assumption of command in 1885, he decided that the Belfast force would only be selected from volunteers who had served a minimum of three years in the R.I.C.- a move which gave the Belfast force 'the pick.. of 12,000 men'.¹⁶ Although Belfast was a popular destination during these years with no shortage of volunteers, this frequently changed as city service either became more taxing or the cost of living rose. By 1914 volunteers were rare and men had to be sent both from the Depot and the counties, subject to the caveat that they were 'suitable for Belfast', and men came to the city with 'two years service...[or]...after a very short service'.¹⁷

Although postings into and out of Belfast were regular, the R.I.C. were consistently under pressure from Belfast City Council to minimise the transfers and create more of a settled, local force. This system operated for most of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and was a mutually beneficial arrangement which allowed the R.I.C. to claim that: 'There [were] very few of the men in Belfast who have not a very good local knowledge'.¹⁸ The 1886 Riots Commissioners remarked that policemen were 'only moved out of the town when they prove unfit for civic duty or get married'.¹⁹ However, in the wake of the Belfast police agitation of 1907, the R.I.C. departed from this practice believing that

the Belfast police, as a whole, [had] come to regard themselves as specially privileged in respect of transfers, for they know that only when they have

the Nineteenth Century' (unpublished PhD. dissertation, Open University, 1993), p.116.

¹⁶ *Belfast Riots Commission 1886, Minutes of Evidence*, p.230.

¹⁷ *Royal Irish Constabulary and Dublin Metropolitan Police. Report of the Committee of Inquiry, 1914*, p.93.

¹⁸ *Belfast Riots Commission 1886, Minutes of Evidence*, p.30.

¹⁹ *Report of the Belfast Riots Commissioners, 1886*, p.18.

committed themselves by some special breach of discipline are they transferred to the county forces.²⁰

Therefore, from 1908 onwards, it was recommended that 'the tour of service in Belfast should be ordinarily 5 or 7 years'.²¹ The sedentary nature of the force disappeared thereafter and no longer would the 'Belfast Police.... be allowed to fancy that they [were] a body with special privileges guaranteed to them in perpetuity, or other than a section of the R.I.C. employed temporarily in the City of Belfast'.²²

Whilst the Belfast R.I.C. had a more stable turnover rate than the rest of the force, this situation had one significant drawback for the rank and file - sluggish promotion prospects. Promotion in the R.I.C. was generally slow and it was estimated that the average time needed for a constable to be promoted was between eighteen and twenty years.²³ Although promotion to Head Constable meant a man's removal from Belfast, ranks below that were promoted in the city and remained there. This had a tendency to create a barrier to promotion from below and the Commissioner of Belfast, Thomas Smith, calculated that 'the men have to serve 22 years before they get their first chance of a step'.²⁴ This became one of the disincentives to Belfast service in later years, and it was a situation exacerbated by the 1906 Belfast

²⁰ 'The recent indiscipline of certain members of the Royal Irish Constabulary in Belfast' by N. Chamberlain, Inspector General, 14 September (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1908/20333, (Un-paginated).

²¹ Under Secretary to Chief Secretary, 8 September 1907 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1908/20333/21891).

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Royal Irish Constabulary. Evidence taken before the Committee of Inquiry, 1901. With Appendix [C1094], H.C. and H.L. 1902, p.80.*

²⁴ *Royal Irish Constabulary and Dublin Metropolitan Police. Report of the Committee of Inquiry, 1914, p.97.*

Commission Report, which drew attention to 'the extreme slowness of promotion in Belfast' and described the case of two men who it was felt owed their promotion to the influence of an officer who they had served under in Londonderry.²⁵ Although the case against either man was inconclusive, the imputation had been drawn by their colleagues and it served to demonstrate the 'deep and widespread feeling of discontentment throughout the body on the subject of promotion'.²⁶

As well as outlining the issue of the R.I.C.'s transfer policy in Belfast, the Commissioners believed there were two other principal causes of the dissatisfaction:

The retiring pension of a Sergeant, after thirty years' service, being no longer his full pay, as formerly, but two-thirds of it, that circumstance induces the Sergeants to remain in the Force as long as they can, instead of retiring at the end of thirty years as before; The "P" examination system, which gives one-third of the vacancies to young men of five years' service or upwards, who are certified by their officers as fit candidates for that examination, and succeed in passing it.²⁷

Prior to 1883, promotion had been through the medium of seniority and the special list system; this latter system enabled a policeman who had accumulated a specified number of "favourable records"²⁸ to be included on this promotion list. The

²⁵ *Report of the Belfast Police Commission, 1906*, p.5-6.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.5. This theme formed the main body of a book titled *Promotion in the Royal Irish Constabulary* by 'One Who Knows' (Dublin, 1906) and some years later the 'Belfast Mems' section of *The Constabulary Gazette*, July 1921, maintained that such favouritism 'was always so'.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.5.

²⁸ Favourable records were granted to policemen who had performed particularly meritorious police work and the criteria for these awards were determined by a panel

special list had the effect of rewarding those more junior policemen of ability and was used alternatively with the seniority list for promotion to each rank. The list provoked the ire of more senior policemen who saw it as usurping the natural order, and eventually the list was scrapped in the aftermath of the 1882 Commission of Inquiry into the R.I.C.²⁹ However, a system of accelerated promotion re-emerged in the “P” examination introduced by Andrew Reed in 1889. This promotional path, which took the form of a yearly competitive exam, was open to constables of at least five years’ service, the last four of which had to be unblemished. The “P” examination was initially reserved for a one-third tranch of all the promotions to acting sergeant, although this quota was reduced by a half in 1897 because of a plethora of senior non-commissioned officers and a shrinking of the R.I.C. establishment. This method of promotion, like the special list before it, was to act, as Reed intended it would,³⁰ as a stimulus to particularly able junior policemen. Whilst the “P” examination was popular amongst more junior policemen and in its effect served to break the “logjam” often associated with seniority promotion, it did nothing for relations between the junior and more senior policemen. The 1906 Belfast Commissioners noted: ‘when it happens...that a much junior man.... is

of senior R.I.C. officers, these records were frequently concomitant with a financial reward.

²⁹ *Report of the Committee of Inquiry into the Royal Irish Constabulary: With Evidence and Appendix* [C3577], H.C. and H.L. 1883, xxxii, 255.

³⁰ Royal Irish Constabulary circulars, August 1882-July 1900, 24 October 1880 (N.L.I., IR 3522 R3). Going before the District Inspector for this annual promotion examination was jokily referred to in Belfast as ‘present [ing] themselves before “the Sirdar” for the “ploughing match”, *Royal Irish Constabulary Magazine*, April 1914, p.177.

promoted over their heads, a strong feeling of discontent is aroused'.³¹ The fact that this often happened shortly after the junior man had been posted to Belfast, as in the case of the two Londonderry transferees, simply made matters worse. However this issue was not confined to the city, and the R.I.C. recognised that this was a national problem,³² nevertheless, it created tensions amongst colleagues in the promotional backwater of Belfast, although there is no evidence to suggest that this compromised discipline in the city.

The R.I.C. man was officially regulated in every aspect of his life whilst in the service. The fourth edition of *The Constabulary Code* comprised 577 pages with 1,819 separate rules and regulations controlling all facets of a policeman's life and, where appropriate, that of his family as well.³³ The code, although comprehensive, was however only as effective as those charged with its enforcement wished to make it. The District Inspector, the senior operational officer, was only obliged to inspect the men under his command 'monthly, at least once by day and once by night [and although it could be] oftener if necessary'.³⁴ If he chose to do the minimum, the regime would not have been too intrusive. Therefore, in the main the enforcement of discipline was the responsibility of the Head Constable or Sergeants. These men were responsible for daily inspections at each morning parade, division and roll call in their respective stations. A Senior Head Constable, who usually acted as the District Inspector's assistant, was also responsible for a random daily inspection of

³¹ *Report of the Belfast Police Commission, 1906*, p.6.

³² See B.J. Griffin, 'The Irish Police, 1836-1914', p.176-177.

³³ *Standing Rules and Regulations for the Government and Guidance of the Royal Irish Constabulary* (4th ed., Dublin, 1888).

³⁴ C.E.A. Cameron, *Belfast Police Manual*, p.10.

the barracks and men within the district. This nominally provided a systematic oversight of the men in Belfast, but much clearly depended upon the attitude of the Sergeant in Charge who had the most influence and daily contact with his subordinates. Senior officers recognised this and emphasised that

it [was] not too much to say that to the Sergeant in Charge, and to the manner in which he discharges his own duties, will be attributable the efficiency or otherwise of the entire party and sub-district committed to his care.³⁵

The Sergeant in Charge was to 'lead [his men] into paths of rectitude, good discipline, and conscientious discharge of duty'³⁶ and when there was a successful working relationship between the senior ranks and the constables the station regime often adopted what was later described as "Home Rule".³⁷

"Home Rule" characterised a station which had, in the absence of the District Inspector, harmonious relations between all ranks and one in which the more irksome regulations were ignored as a matter of course. When this relationship did not exist or had broken down the result was often acrimonious disputes, which frequently ended in very public squabbles. One such incident in Lurgan on 15 October 1904 saw a Head Constable preferring charges against five constables for 'insubordinate behaviour, by clapping their hands and stamping their feet'. The charges were denied and, during the course of this police inquiry, the constables maintained that the senior rank was 'taking advantage of his position to subject the men to oppression. He was constantly finding imaginary faults, and in fact blamed

³⁵ C.E.A. Cameron, *Belfast Police Manual*, p.17.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ B.J. Griffin, 'The Irish Police, 1836-1914', p.537.

[one of the constables] for obeying his own orders'.³⁸ It is quite likely that during the period of Thomas Moriarty's stewardship as Belfast's Commissioner, between 1896 and 1901, "Home Rule" in Belfast was rare. His subordinates were noted for their 'lack [of] bonhomie and camaraderie which should exist among such a regiment of men', a state of morale which one local publication clearly seemed to attribute to Moriarty's 'officiousness [which] has galled almost every man under his command'.³⁹

"Home Rule", common throughout the constabulary, reached its apogee in Belfast in 1907 when '[s]lackness on the part of the non-commissioned officers from Head Constables downwards [and] relaxation of discipline owing to the special peculiarities of City service.... call [ed] for the attention of the I.G. [Inspector General]'.⁴⁰ In the aftermath of the confrontation which prompted these remarks, the authorities expressed concern that the night duty men were devoid of any supervision once they had finished each shift and that the discontinuance (with earlier government approval) of the 10:30am and 5:00pm parades had led to 'a general slackness.... without the provision apparently of any substitute'.⁴¹ The Inspector General, Neville Chamberlain, less of a disciplinarian than the Under Secretary, was relaxed about the necessity for these parades and about the lack of personal supervision by the officers of the night shift, citing the latter problem as one

³⁸ *The Portadown News*, 5 November 1904.

³⁹ *The Magpie*, 1 October and 15 October 1898.

⁴⁰ Under Secretary to Chief Secretary, 8 September 1907 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1908/20333/21891).

⁴¹ Assistant Under Secretary to Under Secretary, 5 September 1907 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1908/20333).

‘common to the police forces in all large cities [which] cannot well be avoided with a number of men on night duty who rest during the day time’.⁴² However, the Belfast Police Commissioner, Hugh O’Hill, had also expressed concern and Chamberlain conceded the issue and an investigation into the parade system was undertaken. The prospect of adding a seventh District Inspector to Belfast’s complement, favoured by the Commissioner, was discussed during the inquiry and was eventually approved.

The Commissioner also drew attention to other matters impinging on discipline: ‘the sectarianism which prevails locally and which, after a time is apt to affect men living amid such surroundings [and the] considerable number of police being located together in large barracks’.⁴³ Smaller barracks had been discontinued after the 1886 riots and the total number of barracks had fallen. Larger, more populous barracks replaced these in a move to afford greater flexibility in combating large-scale disturbances. Chamberlain, all too aware of Belfast’s riotous past, was unwilling to contemplate a reversal of this policy on the grounds that it compromised discipline and the complement of large barracks such as Mountpottinger and Musgrave-Street remained. On the issue of sectarianism, Chamberlain remarked that this situation would ‘obtain so long as sectarianism exists in Belfast, and the only remedy I can suggest is the prompt transfer to another part of Ireland of any man who gives evident proof of having become tainted with sectarianism’.⁴⁴

R.I.C. regulations stated that ‘the expression...of political or sectarian opinions on

⁴² ‘The recent indiscipline of certain members of the Royal Irish Constabulary in Belfast’, 14 September 1907 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1908/20333).

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

the part of any member of the constabulary is most strictly forbidden' and the holding of religious services or discussions inside the barracks was prohibited under barrack regulations.⁴⁵ The infringement of such strictures as these usually necessitated the man's dismissal from the force, however, Chamberlain seemed to have taken a more tolerant view of what one witness to the 1906 Commission described as 'theological differences'.⁴⁶ Another Head Constable spoke of 'party feeling or religious differences [and admitted that] there is a little party feeling in the Force in Belfast. There is some stations it does not exist in, but there are a great many it does'.⁴⁷

The context in which this issue appeared in 1906 was very much centred on the vexed question of promotion in Belfast, but the Inquiry Commissioners characterised the discontent as 'hints and insinuations [and were satisfied that] the promotions...seem to be fairly in the ratio of the religious persuasions of the men comprising the Force'.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, on the first day of the Commission's deliberations, the Nationalist *Irish News* was moved to remark that the Inquiry would be 'a welcome opportunity...to put an end once and for all to the recurring complaints of irregularities and partial treatment in the Belfast police force'.⁴⁹ The paper made it clear that the wide ranging nature of the Inquiry would expose the methods of administration that [had] within the last few years destroyed the confidence of the Catholic population in the force [and it stressed that] Catholics

⁴⁵ *Standing Rules and Regulations*, 1888, pp.3 and 84.

⁴⁶ *Belfast Police Commission, 1906, Minutes of Evidence*, p.115.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Report of the Belfast Police Commission, 1906*, p.7.

⁴⁹ *IN.*, 23 May 1906.

are but vaguely acquainted with the gross and methodical application of religious tests which ...eliminated so many policemen of their religion from the force in a city where a guarantee of impartial police administration [was] absolutely necessary.⁵⁰

The following day the newspaper quoted an incident during which a Catholic Sergeant was transferred from a Belfast station after ordering the removal of an Orange arch in a Catholic area and was subsequently replaced by a Protestant Head Constable⁵¹. The inference was clear in both articles, but the ‘application of religious tests’ to which the paper referred had been in place since the R.I.C. took over in Belfast and the R.I.C. had always striven to reflect the religious composition of the city.⁵²

Perhaps the *Irish News* was just mischief making, and in this instance it stopped short of accusing the force of acting in a sectarian manner towards Belfast’s Catholic population. But, there were concerns at a higher level that there was a perception abroad that the Belfast force was acting in a partial manner, both within its own ranks and in its relationship with the Belfast City Corporation. In a letter to his Chief Secretary, the Under Secretary Antony MacDonnell, discussing the forthcoming enquiry, remarked that ‘there is the danger that the catholic and protestant members of the Belfast Force really discriminate. There were symptoms of that in Head

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *IN*, 24 May 1906.

⁵² This was in any event a national practice whereby ‘the proportion between men of different religious persuasions at each station, is to be as nearly as possible the same as that which exists throughout the whole force of the county’, *Standing Rules and Regulations*, 1888, p.31. In Belfast it was a policy which was strictly adhered to, see *Belfast Riots Commission 1886, Minutes of Evidence*, p.23.

Constable Farrell's case. That can hardly be avoided unless by tact of his supervising officers'.⁵³ This reference to a Belfast Head Constable who had publicly accused an R.I.C. officer of discriminating against him,⁵⁴ clearly concerned MacDonnell, but worse was to come.

Sir David Harrell, a former senior R.I.C. officer, had been approached by the administration to sit on the Belfast Police Commission, he declined to do so but in an exchange of letters with MacDonnell offered his advice on the Inquiry remit and other matters relating to the establishment of the Commission. Having served in Belfast, Harrell was aware of the politics and sectarian strife within the city and his remarks to MacDonnell were revealing in this context:

finally he [Harrell] admitted that he thought the enquiry would lead to a possible conflict with the Belfast Corporation. Before Sir Neville Chamberlain's appointment as I.G. the policy was for the police of Belfast to keep aloof from the Corporation, who are an Orange body; but since Chamberlain's come [*sic*]there has not been that aloofness, because the I.G. in his visits of inspection to Belfast has striven to bring the Corporation and police into touch. This close touch, I gathered, has acted prejudicially on the police force, which is more party than it had previously been. I confess this was news to me [MacDonnell] and I am sure that Chamberlain had none but the best intentions in striving to establish harmonious relations with the Belfast Corporation & local magnates. But if the

⁵³ Letter from A.P. MacDonnell to J. Bryce, 12 May 1906 (N.L.I., Bryce Papers, MS 11,013 (1)).

⁵⁴ Head Constable Farrell later repeated the allegations during the 1906 Commission Inquiry, *Belfast Police Commission, 1906, Minutes of Evidence*, pp.84-86.

state of things is as Harrell seems to think, the more reason for an enquiry.⁵⁵

As it transpired, the Commission found 'that no evidence was given to bear out the insinuations that the religious persuasions of candidates operated to influence their selection for promotion, and that unfair methods were practised by officers and others in obtaining favourable records for particular men.'⁵⁶ But neither the Chief Secretary nor the Under Secretary was happy with the Commission Report, arguing that it tackled issues that were not within its remit while ignoring those that they felt should be tackled. MacDonnell later noted that the Commission's 'report was wretched performance...they have found out nothing, and have made some suggestions that will lead to increased expenditure unnecessarily'.⁵⁷ Perhaps this stemmed from MacDonnell's concern that the Commission did not adequately cover those issues raised by Harrell. Although the Commission could not find evidence of sectarianism, when they were confronted with the 'striking disparity' between the number of Protestant Station Sergeants (18) and Catholics (8), they merely noted its existence rather than investigated its cause.⁵⁸

In the event, neither the Government nor the R.I.C. wanted the report published. Perhaps the government did not wish it published because it would not only have exposed poor morale in a city force aggrieved by poor pay and working conditions at that time, but also exposed the administration's complacency with regard to a force

⁵⁵ Letter from A.P. MacDonnell to J. Bryce, 17 May 1906, (N.L.I., Bryce Papers, MS 11,013 (1).

⁵⁶ Minute from the Assistant Secretary to Under Secretary, 6 September 1906 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1907/5541/19585).

⁵⁷ Letter from A.P. MacDonnell to J. Bryce, 25 August 1906 (N.L.I., Bryce Papers, MS 11,013 (1).

⁵⁸ *Report of the Belfast Police Commission, 1906*, p.7.

that they knew was in a volatile state.⁵⁹ Moreover, perhaps Chamberlain did not wish it published because more awkward questions may have been asked in Parliament about 'the suggestions as to partiality and partisanship on the part of the police authorities in Belfast'⁶⁰ and highlighted Chamberlain's role in closer relations with a notoriously partisan Belfast Corporation. This speculation cannot be answered with the extant evidence, but the report, for whatever reason, was never published.

Although sectarianism within the ranks of the city force was a serious disciplinary issue, there were other disciplinary infractions that would have involved the Belfast 'peeler'. The quarterly discipline returns of the R.I.C. detailing the names of policemen rewarded, dismissed, disgraced and fined is woefully incomplete after 1870 and it is not possible to separate the Belfast statistics from the general numerical returns.⁶¹ Given these severe limitations a meaningful analysis of the Belfast R.I.C.'s disciplinary record is not feasible, although some general points may be made which could have constituted a normative disciplinary experience for the Belfast policeman. Andrew Reed, in an address to Depot recruits, characterised

intemperance [as] that rock upon which the few men who do badly in our Force wreck their character and prospects. There is hardly ever a case in which a man is dismissed from the service where the cause, immediate or remote, is not that of intemperance. Nine out of every ten men dismissed are the miserable victims of

⁵⁹ Letter from A.P. MacDonnell to J. Bryce, 20 May 1906 (N.L.I., Bryce Papers, MS 11,013 (1).

⁶⁰ Copy of Parliamentary Question, 6 March 1907 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1907/5541/4649).

⁶¹ Royal Irish Constabulary: Numerical returns of personnel, 1841-1919 (P.R.O.(L), H.O., 184/54).

the demon-drink.⁶²

This then was the single most important cause of disciplinary breaches in the R.I.C. and one which, if repeated more than twice, meant dismissal.⁶³ It was well known that the R.I.C. man was fond of a tippie and as one journal observed: 'If dear O'Dowd [policeman] has a little personal frailty, its initials are apt to be J.J., which stands for Irish whiskey-the distillation of John Jameson'.⁶⁴ In 1870 intoxication comprised forty-one of the fifty-eight offences for which Belfast policemen were punished, twenty-eight of whom were intoxicated either on duty, parade or at roll call. In 1871 out of eighty-two offences recorded in Belfast, sixty-two were breaches of discipline connected with drink, forty-one of which were committed whilst on duty or preparing for duty. In the first half of 1872 of seventy-three Belfast policemen punished, fifty-nine offences were alcohol-related, thirty-eight of these occurring during periods of duty.⁶⁵ Typical cases included: 'Delaying when on duty, and drinking in a public house'; 'Bringing drink into Barrack, and being intoxicated'; 'Being intoxicated when required for duty'; and 'Being intoxicated when returning off duty'. Notable offenders connected with liquor included one Sub-Constable William May, guilty of 'Being intoxicated on two consecutive days; absence without leave on four occasions, assaulting a comrade, and singing a party song', whilst another roustabout Sub-Constable (one of three) was charged with 'Being concealed

⁶² A. Reed, *The Policeman's Manual* (4th ed., Dublin, 1891) p.vii.

⁶³ *Civil Service in Ireland Enquiry Commission, 1873*, p.137.

⁶⁴ *The Leisure Hour*, Number 3, 1896-7, p.175.

⁶⁵ *Return of the Names of Members of the Constabulary who have been Rewarded, Dismissed, Disrated and Fined, during the Six Months ended 30th June, 1870, 30th June, 1871, 31st December, 1871 and 30th June, 1872, respectively* (Garda Síochána Museum and Archives, Dublin, M.169).

in a public-house when on beat duty, and resisting the entrance of the Head-Constable'. Another rather unfortunate soul 'was discharged on the date upon which it became necessary to place him in a lunatic asylum, in consequence of insanity produced by intoxication'.⁶⁶ In the early years of our period, at least, these figures and examples seem to suggest Belfast followed the national trend. *The Belfast Newsletter* reported 'a charge of drunkenness preferred against Sub-Constables Patrick Clifford and Thos. Maguire at the Maze races' on 22 August 1880, with a clear implication in its report that such cases were not infrequent events.⁶⁷ *The Belfast Critic* was not loath to mention the Belfast policeman's penchant for drink and accepting 'half pints from publicans, so that [they] may wink the other eye'.⁶⁸ In a complaint to the 1906 Belfast Police Commission, one Belfast citizen commented on 'the apathy, or with the liberty to drink on duty, which is a attribute of the police force'.⁶⁹ Such observations would tend to indicate that the abuse of alcohol continued throughout the period of study.

As well as for consuming the 'demon drink', Belfast policemen could also be removed from the city for any connections they had with the liquor trade (or its traffic), and between 1 January 1901 and 31 December 1905 five men were removed for this reason and another five because their wives had connections with the trade.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *BNL*, 24 August 1880.

⁶⁸ *The Belfast Critic*, 26 October 1901, see also 15 December 1900 for similar remarks.

⁶⁹ Letter from T. Blaney to W.P. Henry, Belfast Police Commission Secretary, 1 June 1906, *Belfast Police Commission, 1906*.

⁷⁰ *Royal Irish Constabulary Magazine*, December 1911 and *List of Members of the Force transferred from Belfast from 1st January 1901 to 31st December 1905*

It is quite likely that this was not the height of their offending because allegations were made to the 1906 Commission that the police were aware of ‘a number of spirit grocers [who] supply drink which is drank on the premises [and] the police seem to do very little to check this evil’. A public house run by a relative of a Mountpottinger police Sergeant was a rowdy establishment, but was ‘very seldom interfered with, on the part of the Constabulary on duty’.⁷¹ However, in the absence of other evidence, such letters cannot be more than indicators that the R.I.C. authorities did not catch every offending policeman.

Of course, not all traversers of constabulary regulations did so under the influence of alcohol and other offences included: ‘Being absent from his beat without leave’; ‘Overstaying his leave of absence’; ‘Absenting himself from barracks without leave and being found in the company of prostitutes’. Such absences without permission were one of the more common offences, others included, ‘Withdrawing from the force without giving legal notice’ (or “throwing off the uniform” in constabulary parlance); ‘Stealing tea, the property of the mess’; and ‘Delaying unnecessarily when on duty’.⁷² On 12 October 1890, two Belfast mounted constables, Austin Waters and Constable O’Shea, delivered a horse to the R.I.C. Depot. During the early hours of the 13th whilst ‘speaking in a loud tone, and using profane expressions’ the men assaulted two Dublin Metropolitan policemen. Both constables were sentenced to one month and three months’ imprisonment respectively, a sentence which was later

inclusive with cause of transfer, Belfast Police Commission, 1906.

⁷¹ Anonymous letter to W.P. Henry and letter from T. Blaney to W.P. Henry, respectively, *Belfast Police Commission, 1906.*

⁷² *Return of the Names of Members of the Constabulary who have been Rewarded, Dismissed, Disrated and Fined, 1870-72.*

commuted to a fine. The R.I.C. men were allowed to remain in the force by Andrew Reed, who, took into account their previous good character, and also the fact that the Commissioner of the Dublin Police strongly advocated that the men should not be dismissed on the ground that it would conduce to a good feeling between the forces.⁷³

With the limited data available it is not possible to gain a complete picture of the behaviour of Belfast policemen when compared with the rest of Ireland, but statistics covering the years 1895, 1900 and 1905 are extant.

Table 1: Returns of men dismissed, discharged, disgrated, fined and admonished

Year		Total Number of Men	Total Number Punished	Percentage of Men Punished
1895	Belfast Force	816	47	5.7
	Ireland	10914	602	5.5
1900	Belfast Force	927	61	6.5
	Ireland	9993	522	5.2
1905	Belfast Force	1038	31	2.9
	Ireland	8670	321	3.7

Source: *Belfast Police Commission, 1906* (N.A.I., S.P.O., Misc. and Official Papers, 1876-1922, Parcel 6), Document Number 7.

The above table does not reveal a great fluctuation in two of the three comparisons. The return for 1900, however, shows an increase in disciplinary offences and 1905 a marked decrease in such offences, but as there are no known

⁷³Colonial Office: Ireland: Confidential Print: Irish Crimes Records 1887-92, Intelligence Notes, Misc. M Series, XI (P.R.O.(L), C.O., 903/2), p.63.

singular events that may have influenced these figures, the reason for these fluctuations cannot readily be ascertained. One trend that is obvious is the downward movement in the overall levels of punishments between 1895 and 1905, and this is noticeable from 1870 onwards in the all Ireland totals of men who experienced the lesser punishment of a fine or a disrating.⁷⁴ In 1870 the number of men punished in this way numbered 1437, some 11.43% of the force; by 1914 this number had shrunk to 219 or 2.13% of the R.I.C.⁷⁵ The reasons for this overall trend were threefold. The ‘domestication’ of the force created a reservoir of public good will, which in turn enhanced the respectability of the R.I.C. as a force and as a career, while poor discipline militated against men anxious to pursue that career and retain some standing amongst the community they served. Secondly, clearly the way to succeed in the constabulary was through promotion, and good behaviour was a necessary prerequisite. Finally, there is little doubt that, although the punitive R.I.C. discipline code continued to exist, its application was much lighter in the latter years of the force.

One particular beneficiary of this lighter touch was the policeman wishing to marry. The guiding principle of the force was that every man should live in barrack accommodation, ‘based on the necessity of keeping a force with semi-military

⁷⁴ Fining was the most frequent punishment meted out to the constabulary man and the fine before 1883 could be as much as £5.00, after a revision advocated by the 1882 R.I.C. Inquiry, this amount was reduced to £3.00, roughly one weeks pay for a constable. Disrating was second only to dismissal/discharge in its severity and involved the loss of rank allied to a decrease in pay and occasionally, in the case of serious disciplinary infractions, loss of all or part of a man’s pensionable service. Disrating could last for between three months and four years.

⁷⁵ Royal Irish Constabulary: Numerical returns of personnel, 1841-1919 (P.R.O.(L), H.O. 184/54).

discipline and duties as much at quarters as possible'.⁷⁶ Therefore marriage in the early years of the force was strictly controlled by the expedient of regulating the number of men allowed to marry in each county, a regulation that if breached by unauthorised marriage resulted in dismissal. Further, married men unable to avail themselves of the free,⁷⁷ but limited, barrack accommodation, had to pay for their own lodgings which had to be within a quarter mile radius of the barracks. Accommodation in Belfast was often of inferior quality and frequently more expensive than elsewhere⁷⁸ and this acted as a brake on many prospective couples. This situation was later recognised by the 1883 Inquiry Committee who remarked 'that married men with families must exercise some denial in order to live on their pay and avoid indebtedness'.⁷⁹ The Committee acknowledged that '[m]arriage, at one period or another, is the rule' and resolved to recommend a number of measures including a married lodging allowance and the relaxation of some of the restrictions on a wife's ability to work. They stopped short, however, of 'take [ing] any step which would hasten marriages or make them more numerous than at present'.⁸⁰

Nevertheless that was the effect, and their recommendations reinforced an earlier decision by the police to rescind its limits on marriage.⁸¹ Together these measures helped to create better prospects for marriage in the R.I.C. In 1882 approximately 25% of the Belfast force were married, while the countrywide figures were nearly

⁷⁶ *Report of the Committee of Inquiry into the Royal Irish Constabulary, 1883*, p.270.

⁷⁷ Until 1883, thereafter men were charged barrack rent.

⁷⁸ *Civil Service in Ireland Enquiry Commission, 1873*, p.26 and p.49.

⁷⁹ *Report of the Committee of Inquiry into the Royal Irish Constabulary, 1883*, p.261.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ *Civil Service in Ireland Enquiry Commission, 1873*, p.55.

33%-a total which rose to nearly 47% by 1900.⁸² By 1914 the severe penalties attached to marrying without permission had been softened and, although the regulations remained in place, the illegally married man was 'officially speaking an unmarried man', given an unfavourable record and denied any married allowances.⁸³ Neville Chamberlain suggested in his evidence to the 1914 Committee of Inquiry that the unfavourable record be expunged after five years and that providing the man did not come 'unfavourably under notice it would be a fitting period to extend to him the privileges of a married member of the Force'.⁸⁴ This would seem to have been practised in Belfast and one constable who married without permission in 1915 did not register his marriage until 1919 and was promoted to Sergeant in 1921 without a 'stain' on his record!⁸⁵

Whilst there was undoubtedly a relaxation, there were still many restrictions which marred the R.I.C family experience. Although Belfast married men were allowed to select their own accommodation out of barracks, only one man in three was allowed to sleep out and their lodgings had to be within 440 yards of their station.⁸⁶ Those married men unable to sleep out were obliged to have their lodgings within the required distance, eat at home, but then return to the barracks by roll call every evening. Barrack provision for married families, when it could be obtained,

⁸² B.J. Griffin, 'The Irish Police, 1836-1914', p.560-561.

⁸³ *Royal Irish Constabulary and Dublin Metropolitan Police. Report of the Committee of Inquiry, 1914*, p.185.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ Letter from Christina McKenzie regarding her father, Constable Thomas Henry McKenzie, 21 July 1998 (Private papers in the possession of Christina McKenzie).

⁸⁶ This could be extended to 500 yards at the discretion of the Town Inspector, *Belfast Riots Commission 1886, Minutes of Evidence*, p.29.

was less than commodious and amounted to a sitting room and bedroom with a kitchen which was usually shared with the single men. One correspondent to the Editor of *The Constabulary Gazette* complained 'that nine-tenths of the barrack accommodation [for families] is inadequate [and that] proper sanitation is totally unknown to many females in barracks'.⁸⁷ Other issues intruded into married life: the weekly inspection by officers of barrack married quarters and the prohibition against men attending church with their families.⁸⁸ These rules and others like them were clearly the subject of much bitter discussion amongst police families in Belfast and elsewhere. Despite evident awareness of the disadvantages of married life, there was no shortage of married policemen in Belfast, a posting which offered better educational opportunities for children, a wider choice of accommodation, fewer transfers and less detached duty.⁸⁹

If married men endured discomfort in cramped and unsanitary barrack lodgings, this was no less so for the single man, and the 1886 commissioners were unanimous in their condemnation of the barrack accommodation which they described as 'being extremely bad'.⁹⁰ One of the commissioners, a Lanarkshire police commander, noted 'that the sleeping, dining, cooking, lavatory, and other accommodation afforded is quite inadequate to secure the healthful comfort of the men; and there is no provision of any kind for reading or recreation'.⁹¹ The commissioners found that men in the

⁸⁷ [W. Harding], *The RIC. A Plea for Reform* (Dublin, 1907), p.82.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p.83, *Standing Rules and Regulations*, 1888, p.81 and B.J. Griffin, 'The Irish Police, 1836-1914', p.564.

⁸⁹ *Royal Irish Constabulary. Committee of Inquiry, 1901*, p.140.

⁹⁰ *Report of the Belfast Riots Commissioners, 1886*, p.19.

⁹¹ *Report by One of the Commissioners of Inquiry, 1886*, p.51.

barrack dormitories had to change dormitories at the beginning and at the conclusion of their stint of night duty, an unsettling arrangement that necessitated moving twice in three months.⁹² The problems of the night duty men were compounded by a lack of cells which meant that the prisoners, although guarded, were accommodated in the barracks and could, if rowdy or drunk, be considerably obnoxious to those men trying to sleep. Even when cells were provided the result was often disturbing and one policeman's son remembered vividly 'the angry profanities of prisoners...on Saturday nights'.⁹³

Many of Belfast's police barracks were simply private houses rented from their owners who were responsible for their upkeep-a job that was frequently carried out with indifference. In 1868 there were no purpose-built police barracks in Belfast⁹⁴ and the lack of such accommodation showed itself during the 1886 riots when the R.I.C. were besieged at Bowershill barracks, a small dwelling totally unsuited as a barracks. However, a building programme was instituted after 1886, and a number of barracks were built and the remainder improved, with the addition of such facilities as reading or recreation rooms for the men.⁹⁵

Despite the often poor state of the barrack accommodation, the men were still expected to keep it immaculate, and standards akin to the Depot were the (expected)

⁹² *Ibid.*, p.61.

⁹³ P. Shea, *Voices and the Sound of Drums. An Irish Autobiography* (Belfast, 1981), p.10.

⁹⁴ Letter from Lord Naas to Charles Hamilton, 1 February 1868 and Memorandum on Defences of R.I.C. barracks, 9 January 1868 (N.L.I., Mayo Papers, MS 11194(2).

⁹⁵ 'Memorandum showing in what respects the recommendations in the Report of the Commission on the Belfast Riots of 1886 have been carried out' (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1912/11935) and Royal Irish Constabulary circulars, August 1882-July 1900 (N.L.I., IR 3522 R3), Code Amendment 6 June 1891, p.1.

norm. Section Fifteen of the Barrack Regulations stated that :

The men, under the direction of the Head Constable, or Sergeant in charge, are to keep every part of the Barrack, its approaches, passages and yards, clean and in good order, and are to study to uphold an appearance of neatness and regularity in everything connected with their post...And if any uncleanliness is caused by the children of married families, their parents must be held responsible.⁹⁶

Further regulations stipulated that the barracks were to be whitewashed inside bi-annually and outside annually, that bedding, which had to be folded in a precise manner, should be stowed away every morning before 8:00am in the summer and 9:00am in the winter and that all the barrack accommodation had to be thoroughly cleaned and tidied by these hours. The men had to pay for the privilege of cleaning their barracks or in the case of window cleaning pay an expert to do it, and these expenses were a source of much grievance.⁹⁷ Every article of the men's uniform and personal effects was to be either deposited in their regulation boxes or arranged in a prescribed manner. This regime is best encapsulated in Barrack Regulation Twenty Three which maintained that: 'No article in a barrack room is ever to be without its appointed place, and when not in use, is not to be out of that place'.⁹⁸

The same could almost be said of the men themselves, who were inspected in their accommodation once a month by the District Inspector. The D.I. was enjoined to 'be very minute in his examination of the men on parade',⁹⁹ and he could exact

⁹⁶ *Standing Rules and Regulations*, 1888, p.70.

⁹⁷ *Belfast Police Commission, 1906, Minutes of Evidence*, p.45 and p.149.

⁹⁸ *Standing Rules and Regulations*, 1888, p.72.

⁹⁹ C.E.A. Cameron, *Belfast Police Manual*, p.11.

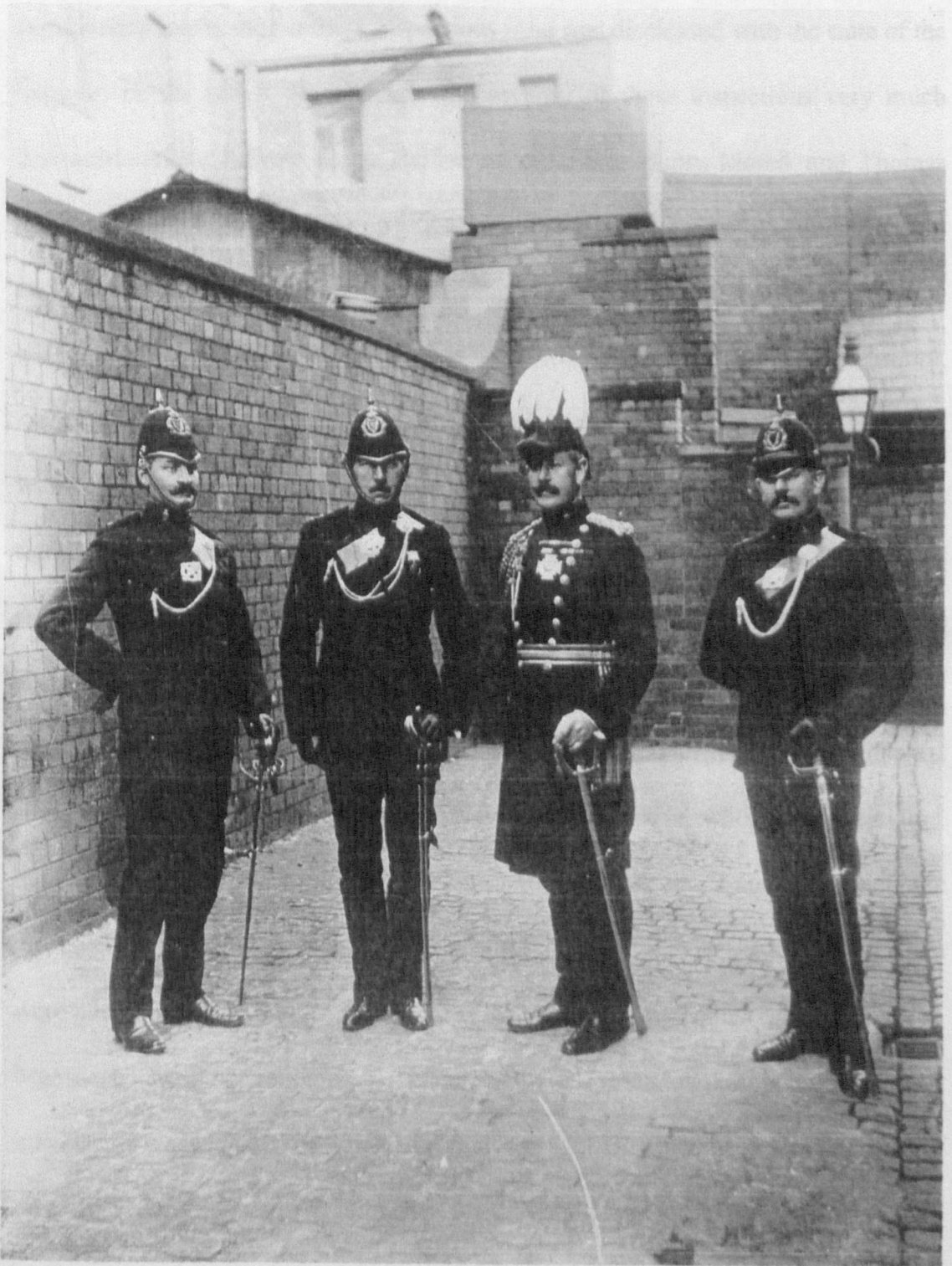


Plate One: R.I.C. officers at Musgrave Street, 1914 during the annual inspection by the Inspector General, Sir Neville Chamberlain, (third from the left). Source: *Royal Ulster Constabulary Museum*.

significant punishments at these inspections if he was displeased with the state of the barracks or the men. Nonetheless, the severity of these inspections very much depended on the officer. Some Belfast officers, like Henry Morell and Thomas Moriarty, were known to be overly exacting, whereas others such as John Gelston and Allan Cameron were well liked and respected, the latter officer characterised by his peers as being ‘without a particle of the martinet..[having] ..none of the vanity, malice or narrow-mindedness which rendered some of his class so difficult to get on with’.¹⁰⁰ These inspections, like the Inspector General’s annual inspection, although rigorous, were not so frequent as to impose upon the men’s lives to the same extent as the daily parade inspections which involved scrutiny of their ‘arms, accoutrements, clothing ...everything is inspected’.¹⁰¹

There is evidence that this demanding and ‘monkish’ existence was relaxed somewhat under the leadership of Sir Neville Chamberlain, who, in an interview, indicative of his lighter touch on the helm, remarked that an officer should not ‘see too much as it was occasionally better to turn a blind eye where decent policemen were concerned’.¹⁰² There were limits to Chamberlain’s disciplinary laxity however, because he was ‘not prepared to welcome any proposal for putting up shelves or introducing easy chairs or things of that sort’.¹⁰³ But mostly the imposition of discipline relied upon how vigorous the officers and non-commissioned officers

¹⁰⁰ G.Garrow-Green, *In the Royal Irish Constabulary* (London, 1905), p.162.

¹⁰¹ *Belfast Riots Commission 1886, Minutes of Evidence*, p.53.

¹⁰² Memoir of John Regan, n.d., Public Record Office, Northern Ireland (hereafter P.R.O.N.I.), D/3160/2, p.25.

¹⁰³ *Royal Irish Constabulary and Dublin Metropolitan Police. Report of the Committee of Inquiry, 1914*, p.192.

were at the time, because by 1921 Belfast policemen were publicly complaining about ‘Head Constables spoil [ing] the harmony by capriciousness and cheeseparing, savouring of tyranny, reminiscent of the old type of the non-commissioned rank [and others] whose discipline savours of the tyrant and the incompetent’.¹⁰⁴

Despite the drawbacks to service in Belfast, the picture was not one of unrelieved gloom and the fact ‘is that R.I.C. men always had a propensity to gripe’ and the city remained a ‘prize station’ for officers and men alike.¹⁰⁵ Aside from the issue of ‘fixity of tenure’,¹⁰⁶ an attraction for much of the Belfast force’s history, there were more opportunities to gain experience in police work and thus accrue more favourable records¹⁰⁷ and there was extra pay in the form of the night duty allowance, which by 1913 had reached the not inconsiderable sum of 8s. 8d. per month.¹⁰⁸ Non-commissioned officers were also more likely to receive the Charge Allowance in Belfast owing to the large number of stations there.¹⁰⁹

Other attractions of a less prosaic nature were also features of police life in the city. The force boasted a world champion tug-of-war team in 1894, which

¹⁰⁴ *The Constabulary Gazette*, 8 October 1921, p.827 and 22 October 1921, p.859, respectively.

¹⁰⁵ E. O’Halpin, *Decline of the Union. British Government in Ireland 1892-1920* (Dublin, 1987), p.134, *The RIC. A Plea for Reform*, p.12 and *Belfast Riots Commission, Minutes of Evidence*, p.54, respectively.

¹⁰⁶ *Belfast Police Commission, 1906, Minutes of Evidence*, p.37.

¹⁰⁷ *Civil Service in Ireland Enquiry Commission, 1873*, p.47.

¹⁰⁸ *Rules and Regulations for the Control and Management of the Financial Department of the Royal Irish Constabulary* (5th ed., Dublin, 1913), p.81.

¹⁰⁹ The charge allowance, granted in 1903, was given to all Head Constables, Sergeants and Acting Sergeants in charge of stations, owing to the greater responsibility of this role, the allowance was paid weekly and was worth 2s, *Royal Irish Constabulary and Dublin Metropolitan Police. Report of the Committee of Inquiry, 1914*, p.13.



Plate Two: The Belfast champion tug-of-war team. Photographed in 1898. Source: *Royal Ulster Constabulary Museum*.



Plate Three: Station group outside Springfield Road Barracks, c. 1890. This picture demonstrates that rented private houses were still in use by the R.I.C. as barracks after the 1886 barrack building programme was initiated. Source: *Royal Ulster Constabulary Museum*.

performed consistently well throughout the years, and the Belfast R.I.C. sports meetings were 'one of the pleasantest meetings of the year'.¹¹⁰ Belfast also had a grand piano club in 1898, a waltz club by 1910, and an Anglers' Club.¹¹¹ Football was regularly played; Mountpottinger had a handball court and Musgrave Street a ball alley.¹¹² There is little doubt that service in Belfast improved for the average policeman under Sir Andrew Reed, who 'softened the rules of discipline'¹¹³ without regret, and there is equally little doubt that in general this more relaxed disciplinary regime was continued under the leadership of Reed's successor, Sir Neville Chamberlain. Barracks were never exactly homely places, but by 1914 the occupants of Belfast's Lisburn Road barracks felt sufficiently comfortable in their surroundings to invite their wives to a dinner dance in the 'snug little station.... [for] one of the most enjoyable nights ever spent in any Constabulary barrack'.¹¹⁴

Much of this chapter has been concerned with the impact that officers had on their men. But what sort of officer policed the policeman? Using the R.I.C. personnel register held at the Public Record Office at Kew,¹¹⁵ it has been possible to trace all those officers who were permanently stationed in Belfast during the time period

¹¹⁰ Illustration from the Tom Heaslip Papers, Royal Ulster Constabulary Museum, Belfast, *The Royal Irish Constabulary Magazine*, March 1912 and *The Magpie*, 9 June 1900.

¹¹¹ Illustration from the Tom Heaslip Papers, *RIC Magazine*, November 1912 and *RIC Magazine*, May 1912.

¹¹² *RIC Magazine*, May 1914, *Constabulary Gazette*, 29 January 1910 and *RIC Magazine*, September 1914.

¹¹³ Sir Andrew Reed, *Recollection of my Life* (1911), pp.77-9 (123 page original typescript in the possession of Reed's grandson. Microfilm copy in the possession of Professor E.L. Malcolm, University of Melbourne).

¹¹⁴ *RIC Magazine*, March 1914.

¹¹⁵ (P.R.O.(L), H.O., 184/1-48). The officer's records are covered in volumes 45-47.

covered by this work. These men, thirty-nine in total, were mostly Irishmen although some had origins as diverse as Singapore, Malta and Gloucestershire. No single county of Ireland predominated as a native county of origin and some fourteen counties were not represented at all. The average age upon appointment was twenty-five and, of those who stated a religion, twenty-seven declared a Protestant faith and eleven a Catholic one. Although the Belfast officer was some two to three years older on average than the rest of his colleagues,¹¹⁶ the origins and religious profiles of the officers mirrored that of the R.I.C. countrywide. Speaking of the latter, Chief Secretary John Morley remarked that this was 'a great standing difficulty [which would continue] until the Catholics have better educational chances'.¹¹⁷ Again, reflecting national trends, most officers were married and their spouses tended to come from areas where the men were stationed. Of the thirty officers who were married, eight wives stated their native counties as Dublin; the remainder hailed from various counties in Ireland.

One of the distinguishing features of the R.I.C. was its officer corps, which drew men from a markedly different social class than the rank and file policeman. Potential officers of the constabulary were selected by either the Inspector General, Lord Lieutenant or Chief Secretary and invited to join a cadet system once a vacancy appeared in the lowest officer rank, that of sub-inspector (redesignated District Inspector in 1883). Those cadets, who had previously undergone a competitive examination and who had scored the highest marks, were asked to attend the Depot

¹¹⁶ B.J. Griffin, 'The Irish Police, 1836-1914', p.266.

¹¹⁷ George Wyndham to Walter Long, 3 October 1906, (Walter Long Papers, Wiltshire Record Office, 947/126/15).

where they would undertake a training regime prior to assuming their office. It was clear from the outset from which class these men would be drawn because the regulations stipulated that

previous to his entering on his course of instruction there, some person on his behalf must become answerable to the Commandant of the Depot, that such cadet, in addition to his regulated pay, shall receive a sum at the rate of £50 per annum, until his appointment to the office of District Inspector.¹¹⁸

Such a large sum of money was beyond the means of all but a tiny minority of the rank and file and, although the R.I.C. officer was not as well off financially as his army equivalent, the position of officer and non-commissioned policeman was roughly analogous to the relationship between officers and men in the British Army of the time. Thus constabulary officers were drawn mainly from the upper middle classes, the sons of landlords and police officers, and aspired to the cachet of gentlemen. When the officers posted to Belfast described their previous trade or calling most declared white-collar professions, although the majority stated no previous occupation at all.

Postings to Belfast were quite late in an officer's career and the average time served before being posted to Belfast was sixteen and a half years. As a 'prize station', there was ample opportunity to accumulate distinctions of good conduct and the Belfast officer corps had an average of 3.8 favourable records per man. The majority of these distinctions were earned in Belfast during riot duty. The average tour of duty in Belfast was just under five years and a quarter of the officers received

¹¹⁸ *Standing Rules and Regulations*, 1888, p.166.

promotions on transfer from the city. Very few were pensioned or retired after leaving Belfast and the calibre of promotions would seem to suggest that Belfast was very much a proving-ground for ambitious officers; certainly they were at pains to conform because only five punishments were recorded for the entire corps.

Officer training at the depot followed closely that of the rank and file in police duties, musketry and drill and the cadet was expected to attend parades and drills in the same way as other ranks. Additionally he had to be proficient in riding and sword drill and attend veterinary science lectures and master the force rules, regulations, and manuals and acquire a thorough knowledge of police accounting, reports and statistical returns. The cadet was also expected to escort the depot night patrols and the Orderly Officer on their rounds of inspection. Other duties such as attendance at depot courts of inquiry and taking recruit drill sessions were also the lot of the cadet. Training lasted six months, although this period could be extended at the discretion of the Inspector General. If the cadet was considered fit for release from the depot he would be posted to his allocated county where he would spend a month under the tutelage of the County and District Inspectors, whereupon he would be sent to his district as a third-class District Inspector. Officers of this rank did not proceed to Belfast on their first posting.

A Belfast District Inspector was expected to reside, where practical, in his district and close to his head quarter station. He was to attend his office at the head quarter station - 'Sundays and Holidays excepted-not later than 10.30 a.m.'¹¹⁹ Although he was expected to submit all his paperwork in his own handwriting, the D.I. could 'if

¹¹⁹ C.E.A. Cameron, *Belfast Police Manual*, p.9.

necessary, require the aid of his Head Constable.... in preparing his estimates, accounts, returns and reports.’¹²⁰ Aside from his inspection and parade duties, the D.I. was obliged to be present at the Belfast Police Court and at any large gatherings such as fairs, religious or political meetings. He was responsible for the payment of the other ranks and was ‘required to perform at least six turns of duty on horseback in each quarter’.¹²¹ The D.I.’s superior, the Town Inspector, was a Belfast Borough Justice of the Peace and had additional responsibilities in the holding of a weekly Orderly room where he would adjudicate on disciplinary matters affecting those men under his command. He had the power to inflict fines up to £1.0.0 except in cases of repeated intoxication (*i.e.* cases occurring within six months), insubordination, borrowing from publicans or spirit grocers, or any other serious offence which might necessitate reduction in rank or the removal of the offender from the Force.¹²²

These offences were not within the remit of the Town Inspector and had to be referred to the Inspector General.

The D.I. was also enjoined to be thoroughly conversant with the streets, lanes, and alleys in the Borough [and] have a good knowledge of the inhabitants of his district generally, their customs, dispositions, and resorts; but more especially should he possess himself of this information respecting the evil disposed, riotous, and criminal classes, over

¹²⁰ *Standing Rules and Regulations*, 1888, p.17.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p.15.

¹²² C.E.A. Cameron, *Belfast Police Manual*, p.8.

whom he is to exercise the most careful supervision.¹²³

It would appear that these officers were not wildly successful in the latter endeavour because there were frequent complaints locally of a force that was ‘officered and directed by youths.... who are inexperienced in police work generally, and especially are totally ignorant of Belfast requirements’.¹²⁴ *The Magpie*, a Belfast weekly satirical magazine, had earlier highlighted in its ‘*More Serious*’ column, major defects in the way officers behaved in their administration of justice and a later commentator wrote disparagingly of an ‘absence of ability’ of officers.¹²⁵

These comments, admittedly from somewhat jaundiced sources, nevertheless seemed to spark little concern in the officer class. One depot cadet was encouraged to ‘never take any responsibility you can avoid [and] never attempt any job which is not strictly your own’, whilst another complained of leaving the depot empty headed with regard to ‘the necessary steps to be taken in a murder case’.¹²⁶ Neville Chamberlain, during an inspection of the Londonderry force, similarly felt little embarrassment in admitting to his lack of knowledge of police duties, when he observed that: ‘It is quite unnecessary for me to ask you any questions about police duties, in the first place because I have so very limited experience of police duties myself’.¹²⁷ Clearly there were men of ability in the officer ranks and *The Northern Whig* did admit that there were ‘conscientious and hard working officers.... in our

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p.10.

¹²⁴ *NW*, 9 October 1900.

¹²⁵ *The Magpie*, 11 March 1899 and ‘One Who Knows’, *Promotion*, p.7.

¹²⁶ J.W. Nott Bower, *Fifty-two Years a policeman* (London, 1926) p.27 and G. Garrow-Green, *In the Royal Irish Constabulary* (London, 1905) p.24.

¹²⁷ *NW*, 20 October 1900.

midst',¹²⁸ but it would seem they may well have been a minority. There can be little doubt that this view of the incompetence of many officers in Belfast (and elsewhere) was a constant throughout sections of the rank and file of the R.I.C. One Longford policeman put it thus

[Cadet officers] generally enter the force after graduating for a few months in a grinding establishment, quite inexperienced in the duties of police, and very often flaunt in the faces of their subordinates an amount of bigotry, arrogance and intolerance quite in keeping with their narrow-mindedness, capriciousness, and prejudices.¹²⁹

This was a view shared by some politicians. In August 1880 Mr O' Donnell characterised R.I.C. sub-inspectors as,

men who had failed to obtain commissions in the Army. They were incapable, bumptious, and swaggering, and their chief occupation seemed to be to act as foils to the bank clerks in the eyes of the provincial young ladies.¹³⁰

During a parliamentary debate in 1882 on the police agitation in Limerick and Belfast, some MPs expressed deep reservations about the quality of the officer corps and in particular their abilities as policemen.¹³¹ During the 1906 Commission Inquiry Belfast officers demonstrated a complacency which belied the seriousness of the problems facing the force and showed their lack of connection with the men they supervised. Senior N.C.O.s highlighted this in their evidence and their remarks could

¹²⁸ *NW*, 9 October 1900.

¹²⁹ *FJ*, 7 October 1880.

¹³⁰ *Hansard* 3, Volume CCLV, 3 August to 24 August 1880, p.1998.

¹³¹ *Hansard* 3, Volume CCLXXIII, 28 July to 18 August 1882, pp. 930-38, Sir George Campbell and Mr Lewis.

not have been edifying for Belfast officers.¹³² The editor of *The Constabulary Gazette*, a magazine that represented the views of the rank and file, characterised the officer corps as ‘the ornamental section of the Force’¹³³ He made clear in his book *The R.I.C.. A Plea for Reform* that the officer class needed a radical overhaul and implicit throughout the book is the opinion that there was a lack of confidence in the ability of the officers to perform adequately.¹³⁴

Behind many of the criticisms of the officer corps was the fact that there were too few men recruited from the ranks, and in the case of Belfast the records show only two officers who had previously been constables. The R.I.C. hierarchy was resistant to change and whenever the subject was officially broached successive Inspector Generals resisted any alteration to the system. Deputy Inspector General Hillier believed that ‘promotion altogether from the ranks [was] so fatal that it is not to be contemplated’.¹³⁵ Forty years later Hillier’s view still held sway in the corridors of power and in answer to a parliamentary question on the issue the Chief Secretary of Ireland replied:

There is no rule debarring any particular class of persons from competing for cadetships in the Royal Irish Constabulary, but it has not been considered desirable in the public interest to nominate the sons of members of the force below the rank of District Inspector.¹³⁶

¹³² *Belfast Police Commission, 1907, Minutes of Evidence*, pp. 19,22,115,150 and 146-7.

¹³³ [Harding], *The R.I.C.*, p.24.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, *passim*.

¹³⁵ *Civil Service in Ireland Enquiry Commission, 1873*, p.119.

¹³⁶ *Hansard 5*, Volume XL, 24 June to 12 July 1912, Augustine Birrell, p.470.

Sir Neville Chamberlain later echoed that view but contextualised it by comparing the R.I.C. as an armed body to the British Army, emphasising the need for the majority of its officers to be directly commissioned.¹³⁷ This had always been the subtext and there were obviously class assumptions being made by the officers. From Hillier to Chamberlain the inference was that the working-class origins of the majority of the police rank and file militated against their being considered suitable to command the obedience and respect of their fellows. The analogy between the R.I.C. and the Army provided the officer class with a reason, as they saw it, to ensure that their privileged position should continue and promoted Head Constables never formed more than a minority of the officer corps.¹³⁸

If the statistics direct us to at least one of the characteristics of the officer class, what can they achieve for the great bulk of the city force? Whilst it is relatively simple to create a picture of an 'average' Belfast officer from the data available, the sheer number of the rank and file precludes a similar venture and what one is left with is attempting a representative sample. Therefore a 10% sample was taken of the city force at the height of its strength (in 1914) and the records of 126 men were examined in decade blocks of roughly twenty five men serving in each decade from 1870,1880,1890,1900 to 1914. The records of all the ranks from Head Constable downwards and of all occupations, both mounted and dismounted, were studied in each decade sample.

¹³⁷ *Royal Irish Constabulary and Dublin Metropolitan Police. Report of the Committee of Inquiry, 1914*, pp. 182-3.

¹³⁸ Memorandum on the training and organisation of the Royal Irish Constabulary 1905 (P.R.O.(L), C.O., 884/9, Number 149), p.4.

Recruits from this sample joined when they were four months from their twenty-first birthday and came from almost all of Ireland's counties. However, three counties, Wexford, Carlow and Tipperary, did not provide any recruits and Queens, Clare, Waterford and Kildare only supplied one man apiece. Although Cavan and Donegal supplied the most men, the numbers were low at just thirteen men per county and it would seem that no single county predominated as a county of origin. In terms of province the relatively large numbers from Cavan and Donegal seems to be in line with earlier findings indicating Ulster to be the largest provider of R.I.C. recruits.¹³⁹ Nearly all of the recruits were recommended to the force by members of the R.I.C., either District Inspectors or Head Constables, and after the 1890s exclusively so. The religious composition of our sample, showing seventy-two Catholics compared to fifty-four Protestants, corresponds to R.I.C. levels throughout Ireland in that the rank and file was predominantly Roman Catholic. However, this is at variance both with R.I.C. policy in Belfast and the official figures, although this may just be a quirk of the random sampling technique used.

Examination of the figures for the number of married men again conforms to a national pattern, but amongst the seventy-three men known to be married in our sample lies an anomaly peculiar to the city. There were four cases of men marrying in Belfast and one case of a man marrying a wife who had strong connections in Belfast, all of whom were allowed to remain in the city and continue serving there. It was national force policy to transfer a man once he had married and the fact that a

¹³⁹ E.L. Malcolm and W.J. Lowe, 'The Domestication of the Royal Irish Constabulary, 1836-1922', *Irish Economic and Social History*, xix (1992), p.33.

Belfast man would 'not necessarily be removed to a County'¹⁴⁰ upon marriage enhanced the attraction of Belfast for policemen. Policemen served an average of twelve years before getting married, a few months more than the national average.¹⁴¹

Policemen coming to the city would have had a little over six and a half year's service and would have served in Belfast for eight years and seven months. However, this overall figure masks a longevity of service of nearly ten years in the 1880 to 1900 decade sub-sets and it would seem that disbandment accounted for the truncation of service in the last decade. In the 1870 sub-set there is a low period (six and a half years) of service. This may be explained by the considerable discontent in the R.I.C. over matters of pay and conditions of service during the first three years of this decade. Nationally, voluntary resignations rose from 332 in 1867 to 704 in 1872,¹⁴² and it is likely that the dissatisfaction, which was keenly felt in Belfast, caused many men to leave the service early. For most men Belfast was either the final or penultimate posting and just twenty-two men from the total sample had more than one posting after their city duty.

In terms of discipline the Belfast R.I.C. man had an average of one and a half favourable records per man and two records of punishment, but these aggregated totals hide great disparities. In the final two decade sub-sets the number of favourable and unfavourable records accrued dropped significantly as the length of their service was shortened by the fact of disbandment. The last decade figures show only two favourable records and three punishments in total - it would seem they

¹⁴⁰ C.E.A. Cameron, *Belfast Police Manual*, p.27.

¹⁴¹ B.J. Griffin, 'The Irish Police, 1836-1914', p.561.

¹⁴² *Civil Service in Ireland Enquiry Commission, 1873*, p.3.

simply had less time to impress and misbehave themselves. The majority of the punishments occurred in the 1880s and this may well have been connected with the police agitation over pay and conditions which arose from the strains of the Land War and which affected the men in Belfast almost as much as it did the men in Limerick. In general terms the behaviour of men in the samples improved over time and this would seem to confirm patterns discussed earlier in this chapter.

The prior occupations of the Belfast R.I.C. men reflect the agrarian nature of much of Irish society during this period, as ninety-four men previously worked in agriculture before joining the police. Sixty-two men described themselves as Farmers and thirty as Labourers, but as it is scarcely credible that these 'Farmers' would have left feasible businesses for the R.I.C., it is therefore much more likely that these men were actually farmer's sons. In practice a farmer's son laboured on his father's farm until such a time as he inherited the farm or hired himself out to other tenant farmers when the necessity arose and so the distinction between farmer, farmer's son and labourer becomes somewhat blurred. The preponderance in the 1870 data sub-set of labourers compared to later years may suggest more accurate later reporting or merely that the nomenclature changed as men became more reluctant to describe themselves as merely labourers. Of the remaining occupational groups only three men could be described as 'white collar' employees, one was a clerk and two teachers. Other jobs listed varied from a fishmonger, linen dresser to a plate-maker. Twelve men stated that they had no previous occupation, but a previous study¹⁴³ of national figures has shown that these men were in all probability the sons of

¹⁴³ B.J. Griffin, 'The Irish Police, 1835-1914', p.86.

policemen or retired members and were not unemployed or paupers.

Although of necessity a small sample, this shows that our typical Belfast 'peeler' conforms very much to the picture described elsewhere in this chapter and mirrors that of the average policeman nationally. If our 'Black enamelled peeler' cut a distinctive figure along the Shankill or Falls Road, he was in reality little different from the 'peasant in a green frieze coat'¹⁴⁴ who policed the rest of Ireland.

¹⁴⁴ An oft repeated sobriquet of the Victorian R.I.C. man.

CHAPTER III

TRIPPING UP A POLICEMAN

On 10 March 1914, during his evidence to a government enquiry on the pay and conditions of his force, the Inspector General, Colonel Sir Neville Chamberlain, memorably defined the difference between policing in England and Ireland when he remarked that: 'In England you trip up a thief; in Ireland you trip up a policeman'.¹ Chamberlain's observation was made as a humorous attempt to argue the case that whilst the force deserved more pay, the peculiarly lawless conditions of Ireland necessitated a stronger force than England, and should therefore not be retrenched by the Treasury to fund increases in its pay.

Chamberlain's efforts were ultimately successful and there was no *quid pro quo* for the increases, but the tenor of his remark suggested that the Irish were less cooperative towards the police and so more difficult to control than the English. His voice was not a lone English voice in an Irish Constabulary, his Irish deputy, Heffernan Considine, wrote in the same year that: 'Obedience to the law has never been a prominent characteristic of the people. In times of passion or excitement the law has only been maintained by force'.² But, essentially both men were talking not about Irish crime *per se* or even about the criminality of the Irish people but about violent crime in Ireland in a political context. In doing so they showed themselves to be products of a Victorian age in which the English orthodoxy held that the Irish

¹ *Royal Irish Constabulary and Dublin Metropolitan Police. Appendix to Report of the Committee of Enquiry, 1914, Containing Minutes of Evidence with Appendices* [C7637], H.C. 1914-16, xxxii, 359, p.194.

² Inspector General and County Inspector Monthly Confidential Report, May 1914 (P.R.O.(L), C.O., 904/93), f.235.

were variously dishonest, violent, indolent and superstitious folk who required the English to look after them. Although such crude stereotyping had existed since Giraldus Cambrensis' twelfth-century *History of the Conquest of Ireland*, it reached its peak during the Fenian campaign in England when press columns, most notably those of *Punch*, were 'invaded by a caste of simianised Fenians'.³

This abiding notion of Irish criminality and political violence distorted the true picture. In fact the 'normal crime rate was remarkably low'⁴ in Ireland during this period and the *Judicial Statistics (Ireland)* show that whilst crime in Irish urban areas was increasing, its 'rates were still below English levels'.⁵ If we accept the contention 'that almost all Irish violence, whatever its motive, had indirect political implications', not least for English public opinion, levels of violent crime were actually diminishing in Ireland during the period 1870-1914, contradicting the Victorian stereotype.⁶ However, they were still above those of England, although crimes involving dishonesty were 'greater in England'.⁷

Probably the best way of assessing the veracity of Chamberlain's flippant remark, and *ergo* Irish acceptance of the law, is the incidence of assaults against police, and

³ J. Darby, *Dressed to Kill. Cartoonists and the Northern Ireland Conflict* (Belfast, 1983), p.23.

⁴ C. Townshend, *Political Violence in Ireland: Government and Resistance since 1848* (Oxford, 1988), p.6.

⁵ *Judicial Statistics (Ireland), 1870-1914*, and I.R. Bridgeman, 'Policing Rural Ireland: A Study of the Origins, Development and Role of the Irish Constabulary, and its Impact on Crime Prevention and Detection in the Nineteenth Century' (unpublished PhD. dissertation, Open University, 1993), p.257.

⁶ Townshend, *Political Violence in Ireland*, p.8 and *Judicial Statistics (Ireland), 1870-1914*.

⁷ *Judicial Statistics (Ireland), 1870-1914* and Bridgeman, 'Policing Rural Ireland', p.258.

here too the figures show ‘an increasingly peaceable society’ with declining levels of assault.⁸ But, if an ever more quietist Irish people contradicted the brutish and enduring Victorian image of them, the chief cities of Ireland consistently bucked that trend.

The Irish Worker, in an article entitled “Our Police”, described the Dublin metropolitan policeman thus:

What a skulking bully he looks as he lounges against the street corners of our city.... What a gigantic column of ignorance to be placed over the people of our metropolis to administer law and order.... How different is this ‘limb of the law’ to the popular ‘copper’ of London or any of the great English cities.... what an odious comparison between this paid servant of the English public, and the ‘basket-kicking gentleman’ of our streets, with his deep contempt for the eighth commandment. He is ‘earning’ a decent wage, he is clothed and fed on the best.... yet, when he is quite urgently required, he is never to be found within the radius of a mile. If you are fortunate to find ‘Robert’ at the end of this distance, he is probably waiting to pounce on, with the fury of a lion, a band of playful schoolboys, about to indulge in a miniature cup final with a penny rag ball.⁹

Although slightly less savage, *The Belfast Critic* was hardly more complimentary when it characterised the local Belfast policeman:

He frequently participates in frivolities with those whom he is supposed to awe with his majestic presence. He can get tipsy, join in rows; he can appear in the

⁸ M. Finnane, ‘A decline in violence in Ireland? Crime, policing and social relations, 1860-1914’, *Crime, History and Societies*, 1, (1997), p.60.

⁹ *The Irish Worker*, 29 July 1911.

dock as well as the witness box. When I was a child I looked upon policemen with great respect; I imagined that they had attained their high positions.... by extraordinary intellectual power, and exceptional conduct, but the years brought knowledge, and I discovered that the principal qualifications were an extra strong body, five feet something in the stocking-feet, and a brogue that could be carved. There are, at least, two distinct types of Belfast policeman. They might be described as the big man with the little hat, and the little man with the big hat. First there is the 'new boy', fresh from the depot, who has yet no need to trouble about the shaving regulations. His style is not dignified. He is a source of great amusement to the mill workers. The other type is that of the moving mountain of masculine rotundity. They scarcely move, and their inactivity breeds fatness.¹⁰

Although both quotes are taken during times of particular tension between the police and people, they are nevertheless indicative of a generally sour relationship and 'if there was a domestication of policing relations.... in Ireland in this period its limits appear to have been reached in the conditions of urban life in the country's two major cities'.¹¹

The primary focus of this chapter is to examine the relationship between the Belfast constabulary and the people they policed. Although a comparison between the Dublin Metropolitan Police (D.M.P.) and the Belfast R.I.C. will be drawn where appropriate, a comprehensive analysis of the two city police forces in this context is

¹⁰ *The Belfast Critic*, 15 December 1900.

¹¹ Finnane, 'A decline in violence in Ireland?', p.62.

beyond the scope of this work.¹² Recognising the precedence of patterns of crime rather than mere totals, this chapter will use the *Judicial Statistics (Ireland)* at five-year intervals between 1870 and 1914. These data sub-sets for Belfast will be examined to see how aspects of both serious and minor crime impacted on police-people relations. It will also analyse police stratagems to deal with all facets of crime in the city and the public perception of their success. This will include the two non-uniformed branches of the force, the detective and crime branch special, and their role in containing crime in Belfast.

Throughout the period covered by this work, drunkenness or drunkenness together with disorderly conduct formed the sole largest class of non-indictable offence in Ireland. In 1897, the compiler of the *Judicial Statistics (Ireland)* wrote that drunkenness cases ‘amounted to 45.4 per cent of all crimes committed, and 46.4 per cent of all cases disposed of summarily’.¹³ It was a significant figure, and Belfast was no different to any other part of Ireland in this respect. The overall levels of people returned for drunkenness offences did however decline in the city from a high of 8,776 offences in 1870 to 5,098 in 1914¹⁴ and this mirrored the general pattern of decline. J.J. Tobias warned the unwary historian in 1967¹⁵ of the dangers of relying on statistics alone to prove the case and he also argued that such arrest statistics were very much a product of police priorities and this is ‘clearly applicable to Ireland in

¹² For an examination of the D.M.P. and its rapport with the people it policed, see B.J. Griffin, ‘Such Varmint’: The Dublin Police and the Public, 1838-1913’, in S. Briggs, P. Hyland and N. Sammells (eds.), *Reviewing Ireland. Essays and Interviews from Irish Studies Review* (Bath, 1998), pp.57-65.

¹³ *Judicial Statistics 1895 (Ireland)*, [C8616], H.C. 1897, c, p.18.

¹⁴ See Appendix Four.

¹⁵ J.J. Tobias, *Crime and Industrial Society in the 19th Century* (London, 1967).

the case of drunkenness'.¹⁶

Many of those reported for drunkenness in Belfast were recidivists of epic proportions: one gentleman brought before the magistrate had accrued 87 convictions for drunkenness, whilst another woman had 115 convictions for the offence. But neither could equal Margaret Ann Rocks, who accumulated 200 convictions and wearily remarked to the magistrate: 'Hang me; do anything you like with me, but don't send me to jail, as I am jailed out.'¹⁷ Between 1880 and 1905, the *Judicial Statistics (Ireland)* recorded separate statistics for drunken recidivists in Dublin and Belfast and although the city had lower rates of drunkenness than Dublin, it had a higher averages of recidivism.

Recidivists aside, despite an overall decline in drunkenness offences, police prosecutions for the offence remained a consistently high priority for the R.I.C. in Belfast. This had three effects: it criminalized a large number of people who did not otherwise offend; and it served to alienate otherwise law-abiding people from the police; and, although the statistics do not combine the incidences of drunkenness with assaults on the police, the latter crime was invariably a by-product of the former. Examination of the local daily newspapers in Belfast for one month in every five years, show that where the offence of assault on police was prosecuted, in the majority of cases, the offence was caused whilst the offender was being arrested or cautioned for drunkenness. Typical of these was Lizzie Porter: 'so desperate was her resistance that it required three policemen and two civilians to put her in a car'. She

¹⁶ E.L. Malcolm, *'Ireland Sober, Ireland Free'. Drink and Temperance in Nineteenth-Century Ireland'* (Dublin, 1986), p.325.

¹⁷ *BNL*, 1 and 5 July 1880 and 24 May 1895.

later received three months imprisonment, her thirty-sixth for these and similar offences.¹⁸ On 22 May 1874, the *Belfast Evening Telegraph* reported four separate attacks on police. A Samuel Alford hit the policeman 'several times', his wife later joining him in the assault on Sub-Constable Mooney back at the Police Office.¹⁹ Alice Connolly was no less violent. When arrested for being drunk and disorderly, she struck and attempted to bite the constable and 'made use of the most obscene language'- it was her fifty-ninth conviction.²⁰ Twenty-three years later Cornelius Duff was described as 'a tough customer' by the *Irish News* who reported his incarceration for being drunk, disorderly and assaulting a policeman-his thirteenth conviction for the latter crime.²¹ Although this is a somewhat imprecise survey, other anecdotal evidence seems to support this. One Belfast J.P. described a typical scenario:

suppose a man is arrested for being drunk; when he is taken hold of by the policeman he becomes disorderly, then he is charged with being drunk and disorderly; then when he is disorderly he is apt to assault the policeman, and the policeman when he is assaulted calls for the assistance of another policeman, and when the other policeman comes up he assaults him too.²²

Of course, assaults on the R.I.C. were not confined to moments of drunken rage and the newspapers are replete with this offence committed in the sober light of day.

¹⁸ *BNL*, 15 September 1880.

¹⁹ *BET*, 22 May 1874.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *IN*, 8 June 1897.

²² *Belfast Riots Commission 1886, Report of the Belfast Riots Commissioners. Minutes of Evidence and Appendix*, [C4925] [C4925-I], H.C. 1887, xviii, 1, 25; [C5029], xviii, 631, p.323.

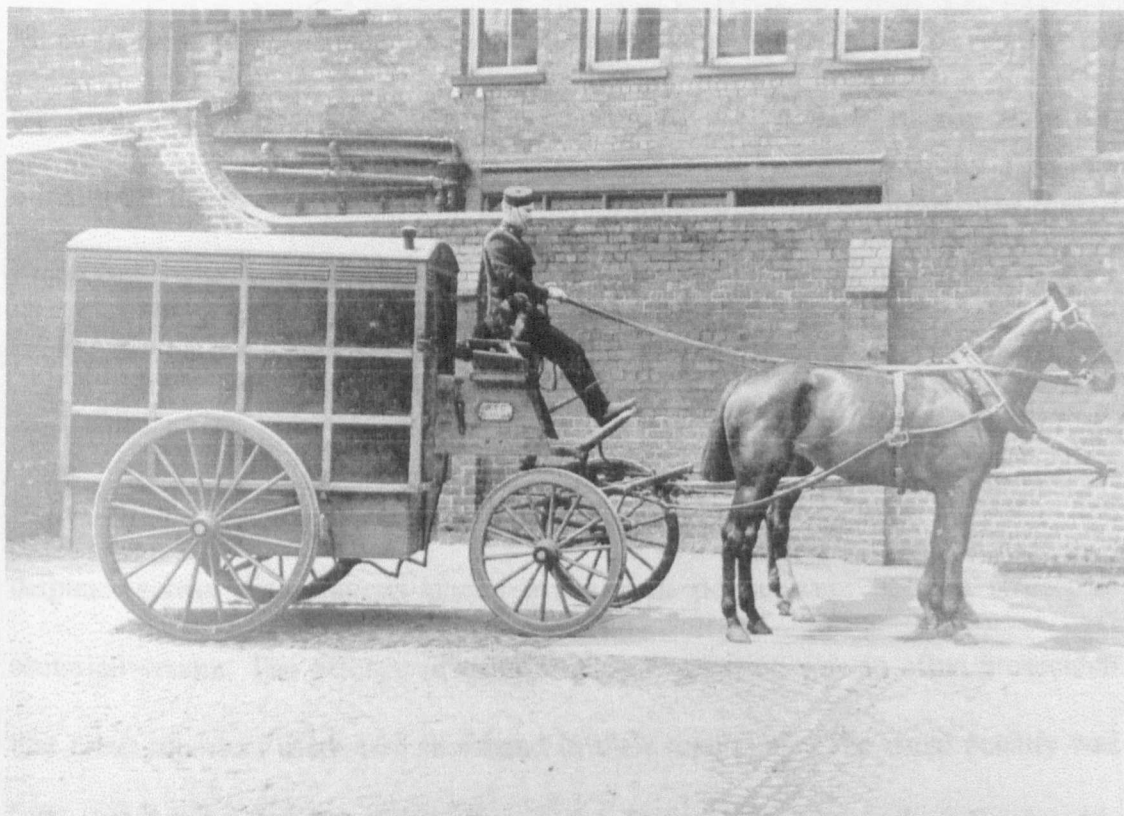


Plate Four: Belfast R.I.C. patrol van at Musgrave Street Barracks, c.1900. This vehicle was used to convey prisoners to the Police Office at Townhall Street. It was also employed to shuttle policemen quickly to outbreaks of trouble in the city. Source: *Royal Ulster Constabulary Museum*.

Many of these offences took place accompanied by sectarian insults directed at the arresting officer and these varied according to the religion of the traverser. Sometimes the R.I.C. were ‘Papist b.....s’ and at other times the policeman was ‘a Protestant [who would be] soon playing with the devil’, or merely ‘a bloody peeler’.²³ As we have seen in Chapter I, sectarian insults were indicative of the resentment felt by many, particularly working-class Protestants, against the R.I.C. in Belfast after 1865, but sectarian epithets were the currency of many working-class disputes across the religious divide even when police were not the targets of sectarian venom. The offence of using a party expression was so often prosecuted that court reporters used such shorthand in their reports as: ‘The usual penalty was inflicted’.²⁴ It was an offence rarely out of the newspapers. Sir Andrew Reed in his unpublished memoirs recounted one gentleman who, after calling out “To hell with _____”, attracted a crowd and several policeman anxiously waiting for the conclusive words “King William” or “The Pope”, but he declined to finish his insult, saying ‘Finish the words yourselves-this is too expensive for me!’. The R.I.C. ‘fully appreciated the trick played on them’.²⁵

If sectarian insults directed against the R.I.C. were one measure of their lack of acceptance by Belfast’s citizens, then assaults on members of the force were another. However, in absolute terms the incidence of these assaults diminished steadily from

²³ *The Belfast Morning News* (hereafter *BMN*) 8 March 1872, *BNL*, 29 August 1866 and *BET*, 28 June 1875.

²⁴ *BNL*, 18 January 1870.

²⁵ Sir Andrew Reed, *Recollection of my Life* (1911) (123 page typescript in the possession of Reed’s grandson. Microfilm copy in the possession of Professor E.L. Malcolm, University of Melbourne), p.35.

616 in 1870 (with a high of 626 in 1885) to a low of 294 in 1914. Assaults on the city force declined from being the third most prevalent summary offence recorded in 1870 to the tenth in 1914.²⁶ But, from 1890, Belfast had consistently higher incidences of attacks on policeman than Dublin, which had a larger population and a bigger police force. The interesting point about the particularly high rates of assault on the R.I.C. between 1880 and 1885 (606 and 626 respectively) is that these occurred when there were no significant riots. This may be explained, however, by the likely resentment felt among the populace at the very high levels of summary prosecutions during this period. The considerable dip in assaults on the city force in 1885 from 626 to 1890 when it was just 493 (declining thereafter) may have had its origins in police tactics.

After the catastrophic riots of 1886, the riots commissioners observed that ‘no attempt is made to give it [the Belfast R.I.C.] a local or urban character’ and enjoined the force to adopt a set of specific rules and regulations which would govern the conduct of the R.I.C. in Belfast and give it ‘as far as possible a civic form’.²⁷ Despite some initial reluctance to adopt such regulations, these were introduced in 1888.²⁸ The riots commissioners were concerned that the R.I.C. ‘should be taught the art of dealing discreetly and with tact with an urban population - to rely, save in the last extremity, on the baton, instead of the rifle’.²⁹ Although the

²⁶ *Judicial Statistics (Ireland), 1870-1914.*

²⁷ *Belfast Riots Commission 1886, Report of the Riots Commissioners, pp.18-19.*

²⁸ *Belfast Riots Commission 1886, Minutes of Evidence, p.234 and C.E.A. Cameron, Belfast Police Manual. Compiled for the Use of the Royal Irish Constabulary Serving in the Town of Belfast (1st ed., Belfast, 1888).*

²⁹ *Report of the Riots Commissioners, p.19.*

R.I.C. did in fact normally only carry batons or sword bayonets on beat duty, this was a position regularised for every policeman in Belfast after the introduction of the manual and much greater emphasis was placed on training men in the use of the baton.³⁰ The sight of armed policemen became a sufficiently rare event that, by 1914, Belfast policeman carrying rifles whilst guarding railway lines, ‘thoroughly startled’ many of the city’s residents.³¹

The *Belfast Police Manual* seemed to make explicit some of the failings of the R.I.C. in the past and its adoption appeared to mark a change in the way the constabulary interacted with the public. For example, the incidences of crowds attempting to rescue prisoners in police custody and prisoners using insulting language against policemen, show a notable decline in newspaper reports after 1888. The manual cautioned, ‘that it is better that an offender should not be arrested, than he should be rescued from custody after arrest’; and there are constant references in the regulations to the need for ‘civility’, ‘cheerful acquiescence’ and the adoption of an ‘obliging and agreeable manner’.³² Plainly, the men were being instructed to be less thin-skinned, more diplomatic, and the anecdotal evidence and statistics imply that as a result of this more reasoned approach the Belfast force met less hostility from the people it policed. This concern to enhance relations with the public, particularly in the working-class areas, can also be seen in the Inspector General and

³⁰ *Minutes of Evidence*, p.30, Colonial Office: Ireland: Confidential Print: Irish Crimes Record 1887-93, Intelligence Notes, Misc. Series VII (Public Records Office, London, hereafter P.R.O.(L), C.O., 903/3), pp.14-5 and Cameron, *Belfast Police Manual*, p.13.

³¹ *The R.I.C. Magazine*, November 1914, p.306.

³² Cameron, *Belfast Police Manual*, pp.14 and 19.

County Inspector Monthly Confidential Reports where comments by the Belfast Commissioner of Police show that the force is anxious to demonstrate a less overt semi-military presence and to cultivate 'friendly relations.... between the police and the public'.³³

The impact of the R.I.C. on people's day-to-day lives was undoubtedly most marked in the initiation of summary prosecutions, for as we have seen the exposure of these crimes relied almost entirely on the activities of the R.I.C. The most vigorous prosecution of summary offences occurred prior to the introduction of the *Belfast Police Manual* in 1880 when some 20,535 offences were detected by the police. These high rates correlate with the highest incidence of assaults on police. However, in 1914 this correlation is tested when the prosecution of non-indictable offences totalled 20,283, yet the assaults on the R.I.C. were merely 294. This inconsistency may be explained by two facts. In 1914 the population of the city was nearly double that of 1880 and the strength of the force was more than double that of 1880. By dividing the number of summary prosecutions by the number of policemen in the city we can get some measure of the rates of summary prosecutions per policeman.

The highest rates of summary prosecutions per policeman were between 1870 and 1890 when force levels were below 600 men and the population of Belfast was only growing marginally. In 1870 the force registered thirty-four prosecutions per policeman, a figure which rose to thirty-nine by 1880. Thereafter the figure declined

³³ Inspector General and County Inspector Monthly Confidential Report, August 1902 (P.R.O.(L), C.O., 904/75), f.595 and *Ibid*, September 1910 (P.R.O.(L), C.O., 904/82), f.21.

until it reached sixteen prosecutions per policeman in 1914 with a force of over twelve hundred men. However, it is necessary to inject a note of caution as regards accepting these figures as absolute. Firstly, the “effective strength” of the Belfast force was, in policing terms, a chimera. The semi-military nature of the R.I.C. necessitated the engagement of a number of men on duties where they could not initiate prosecutions: mess men, barrack orderlies, guards, bandsmen, valets, clerks and later traffic points men. On 31 May 1886, out of a total force of 608 men, **only 408** were available for ‘watching and active duties’, and at least twenty-five of these were static details.³⁴ This hideously extravagant practice continued, effectively rendering the force undermanned on all occasions. Secondly, one cannot dismiss the possibility that police morale had some bearing on the declining level of summary prosecutions. Disgruntled policemen do not make efficient public servants. Logic dictates it would be difficult for a constable to be motivated on a cold, wet December Saturday night when he has various concerns over pay, conditions of service or the future of the force and has to deal with a drunken, hostile crowd that neither likes nor respects him or the job he has to perform. All these problems of morale were present in the city force at times, and particularly after 1900. However, I believe these figures, together with the anecdotal evidence, are indicative of a force which was increasingly sensitive of the need to foster good relations with its public after the policing debacle of 1886. As the police levels of intervention declined so

³⁴ *Report by One of the Commissioners of Inquiry, 1886, respecting the Origin and Circumstances of the Riots in Belfast, in June, August, and September, 1886, and the action taken thereon by the authorities: Also in regard to the magisterial and police jurisdiction, arrangements, and establishment for the borough of Belfast.* [3029], H.C. and H.L. 1887, Supplement B3.

too did the levels of anti-police behaviour. The police commanders could not have been unaware of this correlation and this undoubtedly strengthened the post-1888 trend of avoiding confrontation with a notoriously volatile and riotous working-class populace.

Despite a semi-official policy of avoiding confrontation there was always going to be those policemen who attracted public odium by their over zealous or brutal behaviour. Police guidance on the issue was unambiguous and policemen were told to 'guard against being meddlesome or overzealous [because] to be exercising austere authority upon every little occasion....will be to excite the ill-feeling of all observers'.³⁵ Belfast magistrates were not slow in castigating the police if they acted in an over zealous manner and there are a number of newspaper reports containing very public rebukes. One constable was criticised for being 'over-officious' in his pursuit of a charge of obstructing the street, whilst another acting-constable had his obstruction case dismissed out of hand before the hapless constable's evidence was called.³⁶ The Head Constable was responsible for ensuring that there was a *prima facie* case to answer, he also framed the charge and when he could not approve the charge he would enter this in a "Refused Charge" book, and a memorandum on the matter was sent to the District Inspector. This acted as an institutional veto on frivolous prosecutions but when he failed, as clearly happened, the Head Constable did not escape the magistrate's odium either. One individual was very publicly dressed down and his subordinates heavily criticised for acting without 'proper

³⁵ A. Reed, *The Policeman's Manual* (4th ed., Dublin, 1891), pp.1-2.

³⁶ *BET*, 26 June 1875 and *BNL*, 25 August 1881.

discretion', [and with] 'great impropriety'.³⁷

However, the institutional veto could only work against the over zealous policeman who attempted to bring the case to court. Some, aware of the weakness of a potential case, would resort to petty harassment to pursue their zeal. According to one Belfast Head Constable, this occurred particularly with the city's publicans, although such actions did 'not obtain with the majority of the force'.³⁸ One spirit grocer (off licence vendor) complained bitterly to the *Belfast Evening Telegraph* about his treatment, remarking:

There are ever officious and vulgar people in all trades and societies, and be it far from me to imagine that all the RIC is of the same build and principle as the gentleman who visited me on Saturday evening.³⁹

Of course some were praised for their exceptional enthusiasm. A prisoner, one of nineteen arrested by a Belfast constable, said in the dock of his zealous arresting officer: 'Constable McKee deserved a stripe, as he had hardly left a sinner in Morrow's Entry', [and the Resident Magistrate] 'remarked on the efficiency with which the constable had discharged his duty'.⁴⁰ But these abnormal displays of efficiency were always ultimately counterproductive, not only for the reasons mentioned previously, but also because it confirmed public suspicions that these policemen were trying to gain promotion through such prodigious endeavours.⁴¹

³⁷ *BNL*, 11 February 1871.

³⁸ *Belfast Police Commission 1906* (N.A.I., S.P.O., Misc. and Official Papers, 1876-1922, Parcel 6), p.9.

³⁹ *BET*, 13 January 1894.

⁴⁰ *IN*, 15 June 1897.

⁴¹ *The Belfast Critic*, 4 July 1908.

In October 1902 the issue was raised in Parliament when it was discovered that the Commissioner of Belfast, C.W. Leatham, had called for a list of the type and total of all prosecutions executed by Belfast policemen undergoing the promotion examination. The Chief Secretary admitted the existence of the list but stated that there was ‘no foundation whatever for the statement that the system of promotion is grounded on the success of prosecutions’.⁴² It is quite probable that the Chief Secretary was not being wholly honest, because Leatham later admitted that the number of convictions had ‘been always taken into consideration more or less’ when promotion was being considered.⁴³ One Crown lawyer ‘was forced to observe that he had never known a policeman who did not hope to gain promotion as the result of prosecutions in which he had engaged’.⁴⁴ Unabashed, Dublin Castle continued to maintain this fiction and in 1913 the Chief Secretary argued that ‘no system of paying and promoting members of the Royal Irish Constabulary in proportion to criminal results ever existed’.⁴⁵

Promotion, officially recognised or otherwise, was not the only incentive for enthusiastic police work. A particularly efficient policeman in the city could be granted a “local record” by the Commissioner and although these records were not alone enough to merit reward from headquarters at Dublin Castle, they were allowed to accumulate. One former Belfast commissioner described the process:

When a man gets a number of these local records they are sent up to a Reward

⁴² *Hansard 4*, Volume CXIII, 23 October 1902, p.628, Mr. Wyndham.

⁴³ *Belfast Police Commission 1906, Minutes of Evidence*, p.136.

⁴⁴ “One Who Knows”, *Promotion in the Royal Irish Constabulary* (Dublin, 1906), p.27.

⁴⁵ *Hansard 5*, Volume LIV, 10 July 1913, p.563, Mr. Birrell.

Board in the Castle, and they give him a headquarter record, and perhaps a pound or two of a grant. When he gets a number of these headquarter records, three of them, founded on the lesser ones that have been mentioned, they go up to Dublin, and when he has eight of them he gets what is called a first-class record and a grant of £5 from the Constabulary Force Fund, and that first-class record is entered in the Castle books, and it fills a place opposite the man's name.⁴⁶

It seems the R.I.C. were aware of the dangers inherent in such a system because a circular was issued reminding policemen of the dangers of pursuing excessive prosecutions.⁴⁷

The R.I.C. were never the sole initiator of summary prosecutions and there are many cases of citizens complaining of very trivial offences. When one small boy was brought before the Belfast police court charged by a civilian for playing marbles, the R.M. remarked that 'Shooting marbles [was] a very innocent amusement', and discharged the child.⁴⁸ Frequently either the Council or its Police Committee urged more trivial prosecutions upon the constabulary, particularly when the Council's local acts or bye-laws were infringed. There were a bewildering array of these and the *Belfast Police Manual* listed some 205 offences contrary to the bye-laws, many of them exceedingly minor offences such as flying kites, playing with hoops or swinging from lamp posts.⁴⁹ It was the duty of the beat man 'to see that these Laws [were] complied with in every way [and he] was expected to make himself

⁴⁶ *Belfast Police Commission 1906, Minutes of Evidence*, p.40.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, p.145.

⁴⁸ *BNL*, 28 February 1871.

⁴⁹ Cameron, *Belfast Police Manual, Appendix*, pp.109-135.

thoroughly conversant with them'.⁵⁰

Although the Council and its Police Committee were not legally allowed to instruct the R.I.C., nevertheless that did not stop the Mayor attempting this on occasions. In one letter to the Town Inspector his peremptory tone was evident: 'I hereby require you to give a sufficient number of police to enable the posting up of the proclamation'.⁵¹ The Town Inspector's reply is not extant. The Police Committee was no less abrasive at times, as this letter to the Town Inspector shows:

I am instructed by the Police Committee, to call your attention to the fact that great annoyance and expense are caused by the Constables not prohibiting boys from pulling up the paving stones of the footways with leather suckers attached to a string.⁵²

On other occasions concerned businessmen or citizens wrote to the Police Committee in the hope that it would intercede on their behalf with the police:

Gentlemen, Distillery Street is never patrolled by a Police Constable which should be done frequently, as this street, leading to the fields beyond our works, is a great resort for night walkers of both sexes, (especially in the summer time) and now it is not safe to walk the street at night.⁵³

The positive response from the R.I.C. over this⁵⁴ and other matters brought to its notice demonstrates that, despite the uneasy relationship between the Council and

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, p.20.

⁵¹ *Town Clerk's Letter Book*, 19 August 1872 (Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, hereafter P.R.O.N.I., LA/7/29AA/3), p.773.

⁵² *Ibid*, 26 September 1872, p.827.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 10 December 1872, p.888.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p.892 and *BNL*, 3 March 1896.

the police, the R.I.C. was often willing to react to relatively petty grievances expressed by the leaders of the community. But, the force was constantly aware of the volatility of the population at large, and on occasions it was obliged to make clear that it would only pursue some minor offences at the Council's behest.⁵⁵ The degree to which some, particularly the so-called "respectable classes", were prepared to report such minor infractions, is indicative of some limited level of support and of the extent to which they regarded the force as effective. Some of this support demonstrated a high level of self-interest, when, for example, illegal street traders, newspaper vendors and corner boys impeded trade, nevertheless, retailers would also help the R.I.C. on some occasions when assaults or incidences of drunkenness took place.⁵⁶ This grudging acceptance often surfaced amongst the working-class of the city. The regularity of a city beat meant that a policeman was rarely far from earshot and he was frequently called upon to act as a mediator in family disputes or in incidents of domestic violence.⁵⁷ This willingness to use the police in domestic disputes extended to assisting the R.I.C. by reporting crimes of theft from their own and neighbour's dwellings, although the same people were generally unwilling to assist the constabulary in incidences where their own class were involved in cases of common assault or drunkenness, usually preferring to rescue the miscreant rather than help the police.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Letter from the Commissioner, 26 April 1913, *Belfast Corporation Police Committee Minute Book*, April 1913, Belfast City Hall.

⁵⁶ *Belfast Riots Commission 1886, Minutes of Evidence*, p.159, *BNL*, 5 November 1883 and *The Belfast Critic*, 5 April 1902.

⁵⁷ *BET*, 18 and 23 January 1907, *BNL*, 20 March 1896, *BET*, 5 June 1875.

⁵⁸ Inspector General and County Inspector Monthly Confidential Report, February

As we have seen, the fraught relationship between the R.I.C. and Belfast's citizens was often exacerbated by the over zealous constable, but occasionally far worse actions by the police served to rend the delicate relational fabric. Commenting on the prosecution of a Head Constable in Rathkeale for false arrest, assault and illegal imprisonment, *The Magpie* included a warning to the force from the *Constabulary Gazette*:

Nothing is so calculated to bring the whole police force into disrepute with the public as this attitude of over zeal in the making of prisoners, and no policy is so foolish as the courting of public odium. The greatest and most necessary virtue for him to possess is an unperturbed temper. If a harsh action is done by one policeman the whole force suffers.⁵⁹

The Magpie clearly agreed and remarked that:

We in Belfast know how true this is. Much of the antagonism which has existed, and unfortunately still exists, between police and people, has been largely due to the hasty and ill considered actions of a few individuals. The circumstances may be, and often are, extreme, but tact and judgement are the qualities required, not as is usual with the youthful policeman, to rush at the matter like a bull at a gate.⁶⁰

In 1872 the city force had been acutely embarrassed by the actions of one of its

1911 (P.R.O.(L), C.O., 904/83), f.217 and *Ibid*, March 1912 (P.R.O.(L), C.O., 904/86), f.497 and *BNL*, 9 July 1866, *BMN*, 6 March 1872, *BET*, 23 May 1874, *BNL*, 5 November 1883 and *IN*, 30 June 1897.

⁵⁹ *The Magpie*, 30 June 1900.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*.

policemen in what became known as the Black Affair. Whilst on patrol in Frederick Street, Sub-Constable Foster had come across a crowd, one of whom had a cut mouth. The man, Thomas Black, argued with the policeman but both eventually went their separate ways. Whilst resuming his beat the Sub-Constable was advised by a bystander that he was to be wary of Black who had ‘promised to do for him’. The policeman immediately followed Black into Lancaster Street, and hit Black on the head with such violence that the man was hospitalised.⁶¹ After Black recovered, the case came to court and the Town Inspector was forced to defend the Sub-Constable. Foster had foolishly brought charges against Black for an assault when the reverse was true. When the facts were revealed the case was dismissed amid understandable claims of police brutality. *The Belfast Morning News* in righteous indignation asked: ‘may we inquire.... as to what security Black’s broken head gives us that others will not be crushed in, under like circumstances, with an equal impunity?’.⁶² The Black Affair became something of a *cause celebre* and served to exacerbate tensions between the town force and the public and sour relations with *The Belfast Morning News* and its successor paper *The Irish News*.

Judging by *The Magpie*’s comments in June 1900, incidents like the Black Affair were not wholly uncommon in Belfast and as *The Globe* had earlier remarked: ‘Doubtless, a great deal of such unjustifiable interference goes on, of which the public hear and know nothing’.⁶³ It seems that *The Magpie* was guilty of remarkable prescience, because the following month the Neeson Case hit the headlines. On 25

⁶¹ *BMN*, 20 March 1872.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Quoted in *BNI*, 13 September 1882.

July, Daniel Neeson was charged with taking part in a riot on 6 June in Cullingtree Road. The police claimed that Neeson had been part of a crowd of stone throwers and after cursing the police had, together with several other rioters, run into his house, stoned the police, prevented their entry and fought with the police when they did gain entry. The first cross-examination of the R.I.C. made manifest their culpability in a savage and unwarranted attack on Neeson, which involved serious injuries to his head and body and the gratuitous wrecking of his house by at least ten policemen. Further evidence by the police was found by the jury to be a 'tissue of falsehoods' and Neeson was acquitted.⁶⁴ Counsel for the defence, J.H. Campbell, Q.C., believed that 'the policemen concerned behaved with cowardly and brutal violence, and were guilty of unmitigated blackguardism in Scotch Street that night [adding] it would take a century in Scotch Street to do away with the effect and recollection of the conduct of the police'.⁶⁵ Perhaps his latter remarks were somewhat hyperbolic, but folk memory in working-class Belfast had great longevity and this was one incident that was not going to be forgotten in the short term. The Belfast press were unanimous in their condemnation of not only the policemen concerned, but of those in command, observing that 'the men were not properly handled'.⁶⁶

The acquittal of Neeson brought forth calls 'to punish the persons whom the decision of the jury really convicted', but none of the policemen were committed on

⁶⁴ *NW*, 27 July 1900.

⁶⁵ *IN*, 26 July 1900.

⁶⁶ *BNL*, *IN*, *BET*, *NW*, 27 July 1900, *The Magpie*, 4 August 1900 and *BMN*, 28 July 1900.



Plate Five: Justice and public opinion triumph over a policeman guilty of perjury and brutality whilst Daniel Neeson looks on. Source: *The Magpie*, 4 August 1900.

perjury charges, they were merely transferred from the city to other parts of Ireland.⁶⁷ As a result of his injuries, Neeson was unable to work again and although he was granted a small amount of compensation, it was scarce recompense for a lost livelihood. The case and its disappointing aftermath ushered in a particularly bad era of police-people relations and shook the confidence many had in the police system itself.⁶⁸ Inevitably, the Council, fresh from its disputes with the R.I.C. during the 1898 riots, was little disposed to support the constabulary and debates in the chamber centred on the need to wholly civilianise the force. Commenting on these exchanges *The Belfast Critic's* correspondent wrote:

Speaking from my own experience, I can certainly say that a semi-military force is no good. They are always distrusted by the people, and what you get in the way of policemen in Belfast is usually something that is more suitable for a village than a big city.⁶⁹

But were these criticisms of the force accurate or were they feelings vented in momentary indignation? Measuring police productivity by the rate of summary prosecutions is, as we have seen, somewhat of a complex issue. However, if the Belfast force is to be judged as “civilianised”, then its “arrest/clear up rates” of indictable crime must be a factor to consider in the equation. In the matter of indictable crime, the force enjoyed rates which would be the envy of most modern police forces. With peaks and a notable trough (more of which later), the force had a

⁶⁷ *The Magpie*, 4 August 1900, Royal Irish Constabulary Personnel Register (P.R.O.(L), HO 184/1-48).

⁶⁸ *IN*, 27 July 1900.

⁶⁹ *The Belfast Critic*, 8 September 1900.

higher clear up rate than the D.M.P., and in burglary, housebreaking and breaking into shops or warehouses, in 1904 the force had a far better record of apprehensions and convictions than three of England's largest cities.⁷⁰ Belfast's clear up rates were comparable with Ireland as a whole, which enjoyed better rates 'than the majority of English county forces'.⁷¹ In the period 1870-1890, Belfast's levels of indictable crime remained relatively low and its detection and conviction rates were high. However between 1890-5 they nearly quadrupled, although detection rates remained constant. This peak can be explained by a change in counting procedures. In 1893, a select committee⁷² revised the criminal section of the judicial statistics and the procedural changes and the revision of the figures had the net effect of generally increasing the overall totals of indictable offences throughout Ireland.

Despite previous good overall detection and conviction rates, it was the misfortune of the Belfast force that they were dipping at about the time that criticism of the force over the Neeson case was at its most trenchant. On his assumption of command that year, Neville Chamberlain made a trip to Belfast, 'waiting on the Lord Mayor and the Police Committee [and he] left with the impression that there was a good deal that required [his] very earnest consideration'.⁷³ The main thrust of the Council's criticisms focussed on the R.I.C.'s lack of diligence in protecting the 9000

⁷⁰ *Judicial Statistics (Ireland), 1870-1914 and Belfast Police Commission 1906*, Return No. 1.

⁷¹ Bridgeman, 'Policing Rural Ireland', p.250.

⁷² *1893 Select Committee to Revise the Criminal Portion of the Judicial Statistics*, British Parliamentary Papers, 1895, CVIII.

⁷³ *Belfast Police Commission 1906, Minutes of Evidence*, p.118.

odd unoccupied houses in the city. This was not a new issue⁷⁴ and the fact that many councillors had considerable property portfolios added piquancy to their complaints. E.S.W. De Cobain, a prominent local politician and notable slum landlord, was a persistent critic in this regard and his venomous attacks on the R.I.C., mostly notably in 1886,⁷⁵ can, to an extent, be seen in this context. However, the Council as a corporate body had legitimate concerns, because they were responsible for paying any compensation claims arising out of damage to vacant properties, although the payment levels obtaining when the Council complained to Chamberlain were at an almost unprecedented low.⁷⁶

But criticisms emanating from such a hostile source must be treated with a degree of circumspection. Boundary changes, which occurred in November 1897, increased the size of Belfast from ten to twenty-three square miles; ‘the city simply took wings and extended out’ and with it the population, which went from 256,000 in 1891 to 359,000 by 1901.⁷⁷ In contrast, the force size only increased by 180 men during the same period.⁷⁸ Also, the R.I.C. found itself exceptionally busy in 1898-9, with both the riots of 1898 and ‘the extra duties which the men had to perform, especially

⁷⁴ *Town Clerk's Letter Book*, 16 January 1872 (P.R.O.N.I., LA/7/29AA/3), pp.929-30.

⁷⁵ W. Shankhill, *The Belfast Riots, 1886. The Island men and Shankhill Road defended. Patronized by E.S.W. De Cobain Esq., M.P. Respectfully and affectionately dedicated to the Island men, and to the Orangemen of Ulster and of the United Kingdom* (Belfast, 1886).

⁷⁶ *Belfast Police Commission 1906*, Return No. 3.

⁷⁷ W.A. Maguire, *Belfast* (Keele, 1993), p.102, *Belfast Police Commission 1906, Minutes of Evidence*, p.4 and *Judicial Statistics (Ireland), 1870-1914*.

⁷⁸ *Judicial Statistics (Ireland), 1870-1914*.

during the summer months, owing to political and religious excitement'.⁷⁹ For example, the Celtic-v- Linfield matches were a constant source of friction during this period; the police characterised these matches as potentially 'rowdy' and they were rarely disappointed, with rioting being the familiar sequel to the matches.⁸⁰ These fractious events caused a considerable drain on police manpower and one match in 1898 required 100 R.I.C. men to police the gathering.⁸¹ These extra duties impinged upon "ordinary" police work and the R.I.C. found themselves 'somewhat handicapped in dealing with this important [burglary and housebreaking] duty'.⁸² There were also practical difficulties in watching unoccupied dwellings as one Belfast County Inspector explained:

The houses are built parallel, back to back, and between each row of houses there is a common roadway.... a back lane.... The walls are not very high and a fellow who wants to get into a house to loot it.... could get in easily.... unless [a policeman] saw him going in....but a policeman must be in the main street occasionally. He cannot devote all his time to the back passages and neglect the main streets.⁸³

⁷⁹ Colonial Office: Ireland: Confidential Print: Irish Crimes Record 1897-1900, Intelligence Notes, B Series, XXXIX (P.R.O.(L), C.O., 903/6), p. 18.

⁸⁰ 'Football. Celtic v. Linfield', Report by Head Constable Magowan to D.I. John Barniville, 29 April 1898 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1912/11935). It was ever thus and in 1914 Sir Andrew Newton-Brady R.M. complained of the R.I.C. having to use 125 men to police a Celtic v Linfield match, *The Royal Irish Constabulary Magazine*, March 1914, p.139.

⁸¹ 'Disturbance at a Football Match', Report by D.I. John Barniville to Commissioner T. Moriarty, 18 May 1898 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1912/11935).

⁸² Colonial Office: Ireland: Confidential Print: Irish Crimes Record 1897-1900, Intelligence Notes, B Series, XXXIX (P.R.O.(L), C.O., 903/6), p. 18.

⁸³ *Belfast Police Commission 1906, Minutes of Evidence*, p.13.

It was perhaps inevitable that, with a rapidly growing and increasingly prosperous industrial population, the levels of theft would rise. The enhanced opportunity offered by an ever larger stock of vacant houses must have presented an irresistible chance for the criminally inclined. Additionally the increased population and size of Belfast meant that the chances of detection were proportionally diminished. However, although the levels of housebreaking grew, they did so in line with the demography of Belfast.⁸⁴

Notwithstanding these facts, Chamberlain, whose grasp of policing was by his own admission minimal,⁸⁵ was resolved to do the Council's bidding. He detailed three senior officers with urban police experience to conduct a fact-finding trip of the principal cities in England to observe police practice. Meanwhile, however, the number of burglaries and housebreakings continued to rise. In March 1901, *The Belfast Critic* observed that, 'the apparent ineptitude of the powers that be makes one incline to the opinion that there is something decidedly rotten in the state of Denmark' and continued its Shakespearian mood by penning two odes to the Belfast burglar.⁸⁶ At the end of March *The Belfast Critic* reported that, despite the conviction and harsh sentencing of some of the housebreakers, 'the public are still awaiting the detection and apprehension of the gentlemen who were so much in evidence a few weeks back. A few captures would do much to allay the public anxiety'.⁸⁷ *The Belfast Critic* continued in somewhat humorous vein in May, but its levity was not

⁸⁴ *Judicial Statistics (Ireland) 1870-1914*.

⁸⁵ *NW*, 20 October 1900.

⁸⁶ *The Belfast Critic*, 16 March 1901 and see Appendix Five.

⁸⁷ *The Belfast Critic*, 30 March 1901.

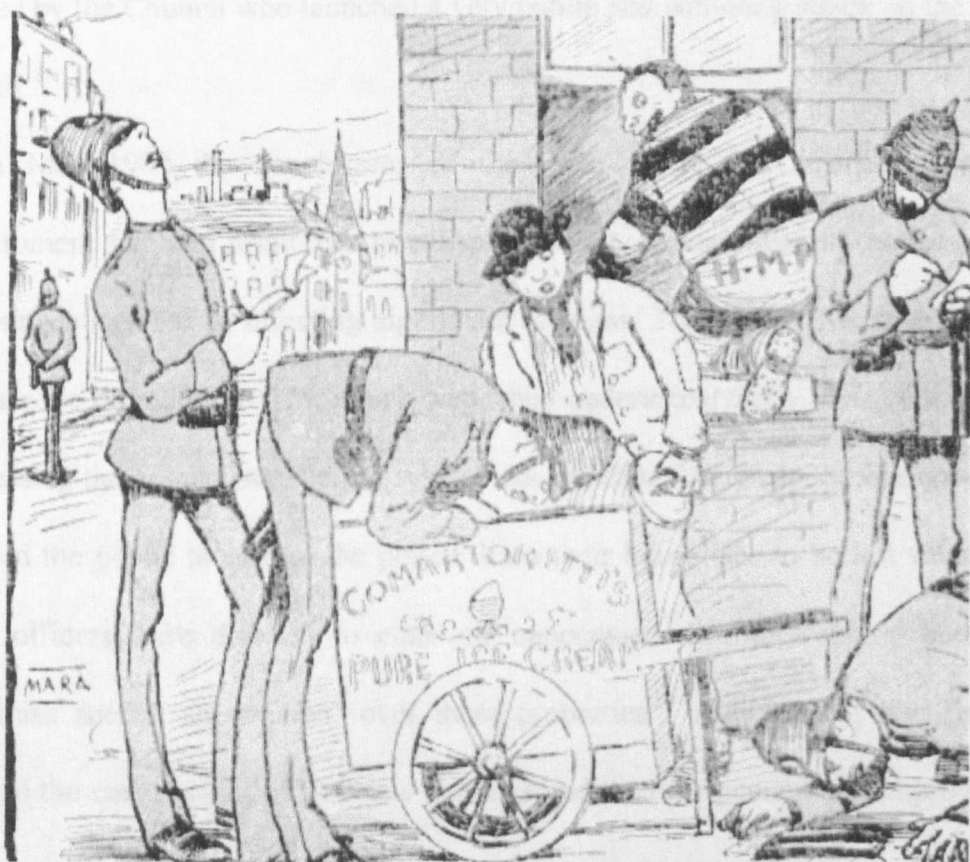


Plate Six: "Our Worthy Policemen". One perception of R.I.C. ineptitude in apprehending the Belfast burglar. Source: *The Belfast Critic*, 26 October 1901.

shared by the Council who launched a very public and withering attack on the R.I.C. in July.⁸⁸

In May 1902 the conclusions of the three senior R.I.C. officers reached government and, as a result, in a rare display of unity, government, the police and the council cooperated in effecting significant changes. The ninety-five double police beats were divided into 175, which were then undertaken singly, thus considerably increasing the ground patrolled. A system was developed whereby the Commissioner invited the public to inform the police when their house was to be left vacant and beat officers were detailed to enter all unoccupied dwellings into a book and 'exercise special supervision' over these properties.⁸⁹ Additionally, the Treasury funded the construction of five new barracks and the enlargement and improvement of three others. But, problems still remained.

Much of the censure was directed at the force's detective branch and as the prime movers in the detection of serious crime their role was crucial, but *The Belfast Critic* suggested:

A step in the right direction would be the creation of a special detective force, care being taken to select men who have not the word detective unmistakably written on their shirt fronts. At present our detectives can be spotted a mile away by their squared shoulders and regulation tread. No wonder burglars are rife, and becoming more daringly impudent every day.⁹⁰

It was an old problem which was common throughout Ireland, and prior to 1870 'the

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 25 May 1901, see Appendix Six and *IN*, 5 July 1901.

⁸⁹ *Belfast Police Commission 1906, Minutes of Evidence*, p.26.

⁹⁰ *The Belfast Critic*, 16 March 1901.

inability of disposable men [detectives] to switch swiftly and convincingly from being policemen to other roles was a major stumbling block to their success'. As one correspondent to *The Daily Chronicle* observed: 'In the country districts no stranger can travel a mile without being recognised as such [and] to be recognised as a stranger is to put an end to any chance of obtaining truthful information on any subject'.⁹¹ It was no less of a problem for Belfast. In 1886 Inspector General Sir Andrew Reed was forced to admit that plain-clothes policemen were 'much more conspicuous [in] their exceedingly respectable dress [and] in a place like Belfast.... the ordinary population would know a man whether he was dressed in plain clothes or not, as they would easily recognise his appearance'.⁹² That the ready identification of detectives impeded their overall effectiveness cannot be doubted, but to quantify the degree to which that was the case is an almost impossible task. It was nevertheless a factor, but the real debate about the effectiveness or otherwise of the branch, certainly within the R.I.C., was elsewhere.

At the end of 1901, when 'serious and numerous' complaints continued,⁹³ the Belfast Commissioner T. Moriarty retired, to be replaced by a seasoned urban policeman County Inspector C.W. Leatham. Leatham, one of the senior officers sent to England, had commanded the force in Londonderry City, had a Belfast wife and

⁹¹ E.L. Malcolm, 'Investigating the "Machinery of Murder": Irish Detectives and Agrarian Outrage, 1847-70', *New Hibernia Review*, vi, 3 (Autumn 2002), forthcoming and *The Daily Chronicle*, 25 May 1882.

⁹² *Belfast Riots Commission 1886, Minutes of Evidence*, p.238.

⁹³ Minute from Neville Chamberlain to the Under Secretary, 24 January 1907 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1907/5541/4648) and *The Belfast Critic*, 26 October 1901.



Plate Seven: R.I.C. Donegall Pass, c. 1899. This photograph was taken at the graduation of Constable Bradley (mortarboard). The boy is possibly the son of the station sergeant in the centre of the picture. This picture clearly shows the collar numerals worn as identification by Belfast rank and file policemen in an attempt to provide a degree of local accountability. The Londonderry city R.I.C. also wore these numerals. The men in civilian clothes are almost certainly detectives and their smart dress highlights the difficulties that detectives had in blending into a predominantly artisan community. Source: *Royal Ulster Constabulary Museum*.

knew the city well. He quickly assessed the difficulties.⁹⁴ The problems were threefold: the detective force was understaffed, too centralised and 'there was a want of harmony with the uniformed men'.⁹⁵ Liaising with the council, Leatham set about reforming the system with great energy. The system of using temporary plain-clothes men as detectives rather than dedicated detectives was abolished, thereby releasing seventy-one policemen for beat and other duties. These plain-clothes men were replaced by a team of twenty-five full-time detectives who were distributed in five-man teams in each of the five police districts of Belfast. This left thirty-five men at the detective headquarters in Town Hall Street. Under the old central system 'the detectives formed a distinct body by themselves',⁹⁶ which had the effect of making them seem remote from their uniformed colleagues. The creation of Leatham's district detectives removed that remoteness and as a result liaison and relations between the two branches improved. An additional decentralisation of the department took place in 1904, which left just nine detective staff at the headquarters, the remaining fifty-two men serving as district detectives.

The changes wrought by Leatham seemed to be effective as the levels of indictable crime began to fall and the number of apprehensions and convictions began to rise and although the number of apprehensions and convictions never reached pre 1900 rates, they were still well in excess of those of Manchester,

⁹⁴ Royal Irish Constabulary Officers Register 1817-1914, vols i-iii (P.R.O.(L), H.O., 184/45-47).

⁹⁵ *Belfast Police Commission 1906, Minutes of Evidence*, p.4.

⁹⁶ *Belfast Police Commission, 1906. Report.*, p.7.

Liverpool and Newcastle.⁹⁷ However, the detective force was not out of the woods yet, as at the Belfast Spring Assizes on 16 March 1904, the presiding judge, Mr. Justice Kenny, commented on the falling number of people ‘made amenable to justice’ with regard to housebreaking and burglaries in the city.⁹⁸ Although the judge did ‘not cast any reflection upon the energy and capacity of the police’, his observations did just that.⁹⁹ Further remarks by the judge that the high number of police supervision orders added to the problems of rehabilitation seemed to imply that the police were being repressive. A largely hostile press seized upon both implied criticisms with glee, one remarking that ‘no further time should be lost in instituting strict inquiries with a view to the more effective disposition of the force as an agency for the prevention as well as for the suppression of crime’.¹⁰⁰ However, *The Belfast Evening Telegraph* observed that the judge’s remarks betrayed a lack of knowledge because ‘his experience upon the Bench [was] not yet very extensive’ and accurately set out the terms of police supervision orders and the role of the constabulary, effectively refuting the judge’s imputations on this issue.¹⁰¹

Towards the end of 1902, the police had believed that they were ‘gaining in useful popularity and influence with the more respectable people’, and doubtless the hostility evinced by the newspapers came as somewhat of a shock to the city force, who probably thought they had begun to reverse the public perception that they were

⁹⁷ *Belfast Police Commission 1906*, Return No. 1.

⁹⁸ *BET*, 21 March 1904.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *The Ulster Echo*, 17 March 1904.

¹⁰¹ *BET*, 21 March 1904.

failing.¹⁰² The R.I.C. had made progress in greater efficiency, and the crime figures seemed to reflect this, but the press's willingness in 1904 to exaggerate the judge's flawed analysis reveals a continuing uneasy relationship between the press and the force.

There can be little doubt that in incidences such as the Black Affair and the Neeson Case, the police in the city deserved press vilification and press scrutiny of the police was and is a healthy manifestation of freedom in any democratic society, but when press comment steps beyond reportage and knowingly misleads or exaggerates it creates two major problems. Deceptive or overstated testimonies create inaccurate perceptions of disorder or crime, which only serve to frighten the public; this distorted picture damages the credibility of the police force and thereby impedes its operational effectiveness.

The R.I.C. in Belfast were the frequent recipients of such press coverage. In July 1893 the police, complaining about *The Irish News*, remarked that 'attention has previously been directed to other misleading and exaggerated reports appearing in the.... newspaper', and there were other complaints about the newspaper in that year.

¹⁰³ It was not confined to *The Irish News*; the following year *The Independent* was criticised in police reports for misrepresenting a fracas between two men as a major 'disturbance which for some time threatened to assume serious proportions'. Both *The Irish News* and *The Freeman's Journal* were targets of police ire regarding false

¹⁰² Inspector General and County Inspector Monthly Confidential Report, September 1902 (P.R.O.(L), C.O., 904/76), f.12.

¹⁰³ Colonial Office: Ireland; Confidential Print: Irish Crimes Record 1887-1893, Intelligence Notes, M Series, XIII, 17 July 1893 (P.R.O.(L), C.O., 903/3), p.27, see also M Series, XIV, pp.23-9 and XV pp.29-31.

allegations.¹⁰⁴ Two years later, the Belfast detective department complained to the Inspector General that:

The reports in the “News-letter” and “Telegraph” are not worth reading - the former is wilfully misleading all through, - and the latter has minimised the occurrence - simply because the assailants on this occasion belong to their own party [however] a very unusual feature is that on this occasion all the papers agree in eulogising the Police arrangements - and the conduct of the Police generally.¹⁰⁵

Evidently praise from the newspapers was somewhat of a novelty!

Sometimes the newspapers were merely uncritical of their sources rather than guilty of deliberately misleading their readers,¹⁰⁶ but at times it would seem that other papers, most notably *The Irish News*, were simply pursuing a personal vendetta against the Belfast force. One report from the paper on 5 July 1897 was so riddled with inaccuracies that the police characterised it as ‘a tissue of exaggerations and falsehoods’ and offered a point by point rebuttal of the newspaper’s account. Whilst another report from the paper on 10 August was found to be ‘quite without foundation’.¹⁰⁷ Because of ‘grave tension’ in Belfast that year, the local force were obliged to make personal representations to *The Irish News* and *Freeman’s Journal*

¹⁰⁴ Colonial Office: Ireland; Confidential Print: Irish Crimes Record 1893-1897, Intelligence Notes, M Series, XIX, 12 February 1894 (P.R.O.(L), C.O., 903/4), p.22, see also M Series, XXVII, pp. 44-5 and M Series, XXVIII, p.52.

¹⁰⁵ ‘Nationalist Demonstration in Belfast on 17-8-96’, 18 August 1896 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1912/11935/4273).

¹⁰⁶ ‘Statements in Evening Telegraph of 10th of June’, 12 June 1898 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1912/11935/10164) or Colonial Office: Ireland: Confidential Print: Irish Crimes Record 1897-1900, Intelligence Notes, B Series, XXXV (P.R.O.(L), C.O., 903/6), p.22.

¹⁰⁷ Colonial Office: Ireland: Confidential Print: Irish Crimes Record 1897-1900, Intelligence Notes, B Series, XXIV (P.R.O.(L), C.O., 903/6), p.35.

to request that they ‘refrained from inflammatory comments’ so as not to exacerbate tension.¹⁰⁸ Such “bad blood” between police and sections of the press were not just a facet of the nineteenth - century only, but continued well into the next.¹⁰⁹

Sometimes, as we have seen, the Belfast police had been the authors of their own misfortune and this is undoubtedly true of the events of 1905-6. The 1906 Belfast Police Commission arose out of the prosecution on 20 March 1905 of two men named McDevitt and Crawford, convicted of possessing implements for producing counterfeit coins. Disclosures from that prosecution suggested that two R.I.C. detectives had encouraged a woman called Bruce to entrap McDevitt into committing the crime in order to claim the credit for his apprehension and that one of the detectives had withheld material facts regarding Crawford’s role as a police informer. Neville Chamberlain was anxious that ‘the fullest light [be] thrown on the entire case, as it affected seriously the interests both of the general public and the Belfast Police Force’, and in August 1905 he ‘called for explanations from the policemen concerned’.¹¹⁰ The ‘explanations furnished by them [the policemen] were in conflict’ and when Chamberlain requested a formal court of inquiry under an R.M., government law officers disagreed and the detectives then became the subject of a constabulary court of inquiry. On 25 October 1905 Chamberlain passed the court’s deliberations to the Belfast commissioner. The supervising detective officer, D.I. Clayton, was censured without record for his ‘ignorance of Crawford’s

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid*, p.34.

¹⁰⁹ Memorandum from District Inspector E. Clayton to Commissioner H. O’H. Hill, 10 July 1907 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1908/20333/15284).

¹¹⁰ ‘City of Belfast. Police Inquiry’ (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1907/5541).

innocence [and] lax discharge of duty' and the Head Constable, H.C. Reynar, received an unfavourable record for failing 'to make sure that his officer was alive to the true facts' regarding Crawford.¹¹¹ The policeman most implicated in the affair, Constable Graham, received an unfavourable record and was transferred from Belfast at his own expense. Chamberlain concluded that Graham had 'either deliberately withheld, or neglected to report, material information, with the lamentable result that a man whom he well knew to be perfectly innocent was convicted and sentenced to a term of imprisonment'.¹¹²

Quite understandably, James Crawford was somewhat aggrieved at the course of events and whilst in prison presented a memorial to the Lord Justices stating his side of the affair. His memorial prompted the government to act and the Belfast Police Commission began its investigations on 30 May 1906. Although the Commission's *raison d'etre* was the McDevitt and Crawford case, it was given more robust and searching terms of reference that laid the operations of the Belfast police force bare.¹¹³ News of the forthcoming inquiry was greeted with forceful advice from *The Irish News* which believed that 'reform [was] necessary in all the departments, but

¹¹¹ 'Conviction of James Crawford', 25 October 1905 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1907/5541/39950D).

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ To 'inquire into the organization, discipline, and past and present working of the force of the Royal Irish Constabulary stationed in the City of Belfast, and into the existing local arrangements for the prevention and detection of crime and the maintenance of order, and generally to make such inquiry in the premises as to us should seem proper and expedient; and to report whether any, and what, steps ought to be taken, and whether any, and what, changes in the local police arrangements ought to be made, to secure the greater efficiency of the said Police Force in the repression of crime and in the preservation of public order'. *Belfast Police Commission, 1906. Report.*, p.1.

more especially in the method in which the detective staff is conducted'. *The Northern Whig* concurred, believing that 'it [was] the system, not the men, that we should like to see thoroughly inquired into'.¹¹⁴ The Belfast press was not alone in wanting an inquiry into the local force. The Under Secretary, Antony MacDonnell, believed that 'the Crawford Case was a "plant" from beginning to end and that the police were in it if we cannot reopen that case, we can go behind it and enquire into the organization which rendered such a case possible'.¹¹⁵

After interviewing sixty witnesses, the Belfast Police Commission reported its findings to government on 9 June 1906. In essence the commission exonerated the policemen concerned in the Crawford and McDevitt case and suggested that the detective department revert to its pre-reformation practice of using plain-clothes men. Regarding the oft repeated criticisms of R.I.C. surveillance of untenanted and unoccupied houses, the commissioners dismissed these claims, observing that it was, to be borne in mind that the police cannot be converted into private caretakers of such houses, and we were satisfied by the evidence that they devote to the watching and protection of the premises in question all the attention that is possible, consistent with the proper discharge of their other duties.¹¹⁶

They concluded, that 'the organization and working of the body [Belfast force] in general appear to be satisfactory'.¹¹⁷ Chamberlain refused to alter the working of the detective department, because he had 'received no complaints.... under the new

¹¹⁴ *IN*, 24 May 1906 and *NW*, 24 May 1906.

¹¹⁵ Letter from A.P. MacDonnell to J. Bryce, 12 May 1906 (N.L.I., Bryce Papers, MS 11,013 (1)).

¹¹⁶ *Belfast Police Commission, 1906. Report.*, p.8.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.3.

system'.¹¹⁸ However, during the course of the inquiry some Belfast officers expressed the belief that the department could respond better if the central staff were reinforced and, with Chamberlain's approval, this change was effected.¹¹⁹ Little else of a practical nature emerged from the inquiry.

Reacting to Mr. Justice Kenny's remarks at the 1904 Assizes, C.W. Leatham had denied their accuracy, but submitted that he had 'gone into this matter very carefully with the D.I. DD [Detective Department] and the other officers and steps will be taken to stop this housebreaking'.¹²⁰ It is very likely that considerable pressure was put on the detective department as a result of Kenny's comments and it is not beyond the realm of possibility that detectives feeling that pressure would skirt the edge of best police practice in trying to obtain a prosecution. One detective was guilty of bringing himself and the force into serious disrepute and, although the commission report remained secret, the disciplining of the others involved did not and it too brought severe discredit on the R.I.C. Chamberlain believed that a degree of 'good feeling [had] gradually grown up between the people and the police of late years',¹²¹ but the unedifying disaster of 1905-6 could not have furthered that cause. The difficulties experienced by the Belfast detective department were almost entirely of its own making, but a subsidiary of that department, the Crime Branch Special,

¹¹⁸ Minute from Neville Chamberlain to the Under Secretary, 24 January 1907 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1907/5541/4648).

¹¹⁹ 'Re-Organization of the Detective Department in Belfast', 13 March 1907 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1919/26565/7720).

¹²⁰ 'Housebreaking in Belfast and Police Supervision-Remarks by the Right Hon Mr Justice Kenny', 25 March 1904 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1904/6137/87078).

¹²¹ 'Report of Belfast Police Commission 1906', 22 August 1906 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1907/5541).

suffered considerable problems throughout this period and thereafter, chiefly as a result of forces beyond its control.

The policing of political crime in Belfast had always been 'a necessary but marginal activity',¹²² simply because there was so little political crime to police. Unlike 1791, when Belfast was 'in the vanguard of the radical reform movement',¹²³ Belfast one hundred years later was a comparatively tame place for the political subversive. Historically 'the habitually bickering traditions of revolutionary....and romantic physical force nationalism'¹²⁴ had resulted in a schismatic republican movement and Belfast was emblematic of that tradition. The Police and Crime Records 1887-1917, Crime Branch Special, held at the National Archives in Dublin, show Belfast "secret societies" consistently engaged in fratricidal conflicts which left them disorganised and attracting little public support. Typical entries in the Special Branch reports demonstrate this:

11 December 1894: 'Major Gosselin [Home Office, Crime Branch Special advisor] remarks that Secret Society men appear to be sharply divided in Belfast';

13 May 1896: 'The I.R.B. [Irish Republican Brotherhood] versus I.N.[Irish National] Alliance in Belfast.... the rivalry and ill feeling between the two factions [has] been intensified';

17 July 1905: 'From the report it appears that little is being done in the direction of unity between the two sections of the A.O.H.' [Ancient Order of Hibernians];

¹²² Bridgeman, 'Policing Rural Ireland', p.236.

¹²³ A.T.Q. Stewart, *The Narrow Ground. Aspects of Ulster 1609-1969* (Belfast, 1997), p.106.

¹²⁴ P. Bishop and E. Mallie, *The Provisional IRA* (London, 1988), p.131.

16 August 1906: 'There is a good deal of disunion amongst the members of the Scottish section of the A.O.H. in Belfast';

29 March 1909: 'the object of this meeting was to try and arrange a reconciliation between Johnstone and Neill J. O'Boyle, as owing to an old feud between these two leaders the I.R.B. in Belfast appears to be disorganised.'¹²⁵

Compounding the factional problems of the Belfast secret societies was the successful penetration of their organisations by police informers. The Crime Branch Special had been formed after the Phoenix Park murders in May 1882, although R.I.C. surveillance of political suspects in Belfast predated the formation of the branch by at least two years.¹²⁶ It is likely that the early attention to the potential of political crime by Belfast's detectives enabled the force to quickly establish an extensive set of informers and hone surveillance skills on suspects. The three main secret or oath bound societies in Belfast in 1889 were the I.R.B., the Irish National Foresters (I.N.F.) and the Ribbon Society and these had some 7,410 members.¹²⁷ By 1891 the Belfast R.I.C. were able to assert that they had 'been well supplied... with information' and the following year could claim 'good sources of information' on all of these societies.¹²⁸ Although other societies such as the A.O.H. and the Dungannon

¹²⁵ H.O. Crime Department-Special Branch Precis of information relative to Secret Societies etc. Jan-Dec 1895 (N.A.I., C.B.S., 9424/S), *Ibid*, Jan-Dec 1896 (N.A.I., C.B.S., 261/S), Inspector General and County Inspector Monthly Confidential Report Crime Special Precis, July 1905 (P.R.O.(L), C.O., 904/117), *Ibid*, August 1906 (P.R.O.(L), C.O., 904/117), *Ibid*, March 1909 (P.R.O.(L), C.O., 904/118).

¹²⁶ 'Shadowing', 23 June 1890 (N.A.I., C.B.S., 1890/730/S).

¹²⁷ 'Nationalist Associations in City of Belfast', 27 November 1889 (N.A.I., C.B.S., 1889/501/S).

¹²⁸ 'Belfast Crime Special Annual Report for 1891, 30 March 1892 (N.A.I., C.B.S., 1892/5393/S) and 'Belfast Crime Special Annual Report for 1892' 19 January 1893

Clubs rose in importance, supporters frequently ignored the nomenclature and were either members of more than one organisation or moved from one to another as the respective society waxed and waned. However, the I.R.B. was consistently pre-eminent and the R.I.C. concentrated their efforts on that organisation. In 1892 the R.I.C. had a highly placed informer in the I.R.B., codenamed “Fox”, supported by two other informants “Linnet” and “Salmon”, and the branch boasted that it ‘could rely upon being kept informed of anything of importance which may be done in I.R.B. circles in Belfast’.¹²⁹ At that point the Belfast Crime Branch Special consisted of eight men, headed by Head Constable William Hussey and Sergeant John Slowey who were denoted as “Special Men”, while beneath them were six constables who were classified as “Selected Men”.¹³⁰ The work of these detectives was well respected by both their senior commanders and the government and, although much of the information they obtained was mundane, it accurately reflected the state of Belfast’s secret societies.

On 13 October 1897, Major Gosselin jokily observed of the nationalist movement, ‘as for the inuendoes [*sic*] about revolution, the tap of a policeman’s baton would send them all to the nearest public house to say, what they would have done - only for the police’.¹³¹ Gosselin’s comments suggest that the perceived threat from the secret societies had diminished and, as reports about their divisions and disorganisation fed into Crime Branch Special, it is highly probable that a degree of

(N.A.I., C.B.S., 1893/501/S).

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ H.O. Crime Dept-Special Branch Precis of information relative to Secret Societies etc. Jan-Dec 1897 (N.A.I., C.B.S., 501/S/18613).

self-satisfaction crept into the branch. It is likely, that the particular ineptitude of the Belfast secret societies bred a similar atmosphere of complacency in the Belfast R.I.C. Certainly, by the beginning of the 1900s police surveillance or “shadowing” had something of the air of ritual about it, as policemen diligently tracked known agitators across the city or watched their homes - tactics as familiar to the agitators as they was to the police. Therefore, as a new breed of republican subversive began to emerge the old police tactics became less effective. The reorganised I.R.B. in Belfast effected a complete break with its moribund predecessor and as one of these new young “Turks” observed:

however active the police became watching our movements, they never got any information that mattered about what was going on. The police were very active in a futile kind of way. They had detectives at the railway stations, who were told by the ticket-checkers where we were going, and we would be met at the end of the journey and followed about. At this time I had a day-man who followed me everywhere and a night-man who kept vigil outside our house. Our technique was to ignore them and pretend never to see them. Of course, if there was any particular reason to evade them, it was not difficult to do so.¹³²

This left the constabulary with plenty of routine data, but no hard intelligence with which to prevent any future subversive outrages. As with the Belfast detective branch proper, the decline in the Crime Branch Special’s occurred at precisely the time when it was most needed.. But, unlike the conventional detectives, Special Branch detectives were stymied by events largely beyond their sphere of influence.

¹³² B. Hobson, *Ireland Yesterday and Tomorrow* (Tralee, 1968), p.35.

Within three weeks of assuming the office of Under Secretary for Ireland, Sir Antony MacDonnell, in an annotated comment to his Chief Secretary, directly contradicted Neville Chamberlain's assessment of the general state of the country remarking: 'there is, generally speaking, no disloyalty to the Crown in Ireland, but wide-spread discontent.... certain people who are members of the secret societies.... may be regarded as disloyal. But they are few'.¹³³ The following year MacDonnell confessed he was 'not much impressed' with Chamberlain's views in a Crime Branch Special report dealing with a resurgence of I.R.B. activity.¹³⁴ This set the tone for a personal relationship which was at best cold and at worst rancorous, and which in policing terms was ruinous. Chamberlain, faced with an Under Secretary who rejected his advice and warnings at almost every turn, was forced to defer to MacDonnell after he 'rapped Chamberlain firmly over the knuckles' in March 1903.¹³⁵ MacDonnell had 'a distaste for reading police files and a dislike of coercion'¹³⁶ and his sanguine perspective regarding the threat posed by republican activists translated into a benign neglect of Crime Branch Special. Despite abundant police evidence that a revamped I.R.B. had comprehensively infiltrated the country's leading nationalist organisations and was for the first time in decades posing a significant threat, MacDonnell's 'desire to minimise or turn a blind eye' ensured that

¹³³ Inspector General and County Inspector Monthly Confidential Report, October 1902 (P.R.O.(L), C.O., 904/76), f.134.

¹³⁴ 'Crime Special Sergeant's Report', February 1903 (N.A.I., C.B.S., 28288/S).

¹³⁵ W.F. Mandle, 'Sir Antony MacDonnell and Crime Branch Special', in O. MacDonagh and W.F. Mandle (eds.), *Ireland and Irish-Australia: Studies in Cultural and Political History* (London, 1986), p.179.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.177.

such information was not acted upon with vigour.¹³⁷

To compound Crime Branch Special's problems, its staffing levels remained exactly what they had been in 1890 and payments to informers declined steadily from £898 in 1890 to £400 by the end of our period.¹³⁸ Without Dublin Castle's support, Crime Branch Special was fully exposed to Treasury parsimony and for the purchase of a simple but necessary card index system, the R.I.C. were required to provide an equivalence in savings elsewhere.¹³⁹ There was even a suggestion in 1906 that the branch might be disbanded altogether and, although MacDonnell tentatively approved of this measure, wiser heads prevailed and the suggestion was not acted upon.¹⁴⁰ Further, liaison between the D.M.P.'s detective department, G division, and the R.I.C. was sketchy and there were no formal arrangements to cooperate with each other and the lack of such shared intelligence links was to prove catastrophic in 1916. This situation had caused problems in 1890 when the Belfast police were trying to follow a suspect in Dublin and on at least one occasion the police lost an important I.R.B. suspect because of poor liaison.¹⁴¹

MacDonnell's assistant, Sir James Dougherty, shared MacDonnell's perspective, and when MacDonnell resigned in 1908, Dougherty succeeded him and held the post until 1914. As a consequence, little changed in the rundown of the Crime Branch

¹³⁷ *Ibid*, p.184.

¹³⁸ Crime Department, Special Branch, Divisional List, 29 April 1890 (N.A.I., C.B.S., 501/S/239/5), *Hansard 4*, Volume CXXXI, 11 March 1904, p.849, Mr. Wyndham, 'Payment for Information' (N.A.I., C.B.S., 1890/501/1416/S) and E. O'Halpin, *Decline of the Union. British Government in Ireland 1892-1920* (Dublin, 1987), p.130.

¹³⁹ Treasury Minute (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1916/21693).

¹⁴⁰ Mandle, 'Sir Antony MacDonnell and Crime Branch Special', p.185.

¹⁴¹ 'Shadowing', 4 June 1890 (N.A.I., C.B.S., 261/S/643).

Special and, as we shall see in Chapter VII, this was to have a profoundly detrimental effect on the branch's capabilities in Belfast. For the Crime Branch Special in Belfast, and throughout Ireland, 'an annoying darkness descends after about 1905 lit only occasionally by a mundane observation until the scene exploded into the 1916 Rising'.¹⁴²

In October 1901 the outgoing Commissioner, Thomas Moriarty, received a silver plate and an illuminated address, 'a real work of art' it was said, from the leading citizens of Belfast.¹⁴³ Moriarty may have been unpopular with his men, many in the council and the press, but the proprieties had to be observed and such gestures of goodwill were made from time to time.¹⁴⁴ These were fairly exceptional events however, and copies of the *Royal Irish Constabulary List and Directory* record very few tokens of approval presented to policemen from magistrates and citizens in Belfast, compared with other parts of the country.¹⁴⁵ Writing of Moriarty's impending retirement, *The Constabulary Gazette* observed that 'the Commissionership of Belfast [was] the most difficult, thankless, and underpaid position in the service'.¹⁴⁶ At times the same could be said for any policeman's job in the city. As we have seen, the R.I.C. met antipathy from the outset of its stewardship of Belfast, much of it as a result of the force's imposition on Belfast in place of a borough police. The council lost many of the service functions that their own

¹⁴² Mandle, 'Sir Antony MacDonnell and Crime Branch Special', p.192.

¹⁴³ *The Belfast Critic*, 5 October 1901.

¹⁴⁴ *NW*, 9 October 1900.

¹⁴⁵ *Royal Irish Constabulary List and Directory* (Dublin), issues from 1870-1914 inclusive.

¹⁴⁶ Quoted in *The Belfast Critic*, 31 August 1901.

municipal force typically performed, such as keeping the town clerk informed of citizens moving house or reporting water wastage to the town's water officials.¹⁴⁷

This loss combined with the loss of power to direct policing rankled. This was not a situation peculiar to Belfast, Limerick city retained its municipal night watch for sometime after the R.I.C. assumed control of policing the city, precisely because it wanted to retain some of the service functions that the municipal force conducted.¹⁴⁸

Neither was it a position unique to Ireland. Robert Chalk, when taking up the reins of command at the City of York, found the council expected him to undertake a host of roles completely unconnected with the conventionally recognised police duties.¹⁴⁹

But there was another factor in the unpopularity of the Belfast constabulary which had its roots in the economy of the city. Quite simply put, 'ordinary employment [paid] them better, [than the R.I.C.] both as regards money and prospects'.¹⁵⁰ There was therefore no tradition of the youths of Belfast joining the constabulary and throughout the history of the R.I.C. there were 'very few recruits to the Force' from Belfast.¹⁵¹ With no tradition of recruitment amongst the community, policemen as an occupational group were viewed as strangers, whether Catholic or Protestant and equally disliked. Thus, the work that the R.I.C. undertook rarely received either approbation or esteem. Working-class residents generally viewed the constabulary

¹⁴⁷ B.J. Griffin, *The Bulkies: Police and Crime in Belfast, 1800-1865* (Dublin, 1997), p.24.

¹⁴⁸ Intelligence Notes, Misc. Series XXXIII, 17 December 1894 (P.R.O.(L), C.O., 903/4), p.60.

¹⁴⁹ R. Swift, *Police Reform in Early Victorian York, 1835-1856* (University of York, Borthwick Paper No. 73, 1988), p.11.

¹⁵⁰ *Royal Irish Constabulary and Dublin Metropolitan Police. Appendix to Report of the Committee of Enquiry, 1914*, p.93.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

presence as all pervading, whereas middle-class citizens believed they could never find a policeman when they wanted one. Neither class was content with policing levels. The relationship between the working-class of Belfast and the police was often violent and antagonistic, and although police were concerned, particularly after 1886, to diminish these tensions, the less aggressive approach did not always please the middle-classes. The press were often vehement critics in this regard,¹⁵² but in this stratagem, the force showed itself to be flexible and responsive to change and the demands of many in the community. In short, the force was never a popular one, but it did try.

¹⁵² *The Belfast Critic*, 25 August 1900.

CHAPTER IV

A PECULIAR DISORDER

In concluding Chapter XVII of his 1869 history of the R.I.C., Inspector Robert Curtis wrote;

since the passing of the act in question, [to replace the Belfast borough police] and the consequent handing over of that important and excitable borough solely to the jurisdiction and vigilance of the constabulary, no riot or outrage whatever has taken place, proving that no false estimate of the influence of this force with all classes of the community had been formed.¹

Given the city's growing propensity to riot, this was a remarkably brave statement for a police officer to make. Posterity does not record what Curtis said about Belfast after he made that bold assertion, but his confidence in the R.I.C.'s ability to control Belfast's disorderly crowds was sorely misplaced. Such riotous behaviour was not solely the province of Belfast's crowds, but as Charles Townshend observed, it was 'a peculiar disorder of Belfast.... that it was perpetuated on sectarian lines into the last quarter of the nineteenth century'.² This, and the subsequent, chapter will attempt to highlight the particular difficulties created for the R.I.C. by this 'peculiar disorder' and try to assess how the Belfast police coped with this unique type of crime from the 1870s until the end of the century.

Perhaps Curtis cannot be judged too harshly for displaying a lack of foresight because the auguries were initially good. As one commentator remarked: 'The Irish

¹ R. Curtis, *The History of the Royal Irish Constabulary* (Dublin, 1869), p.134.

² C. Townshend, *Political Violence in Ireland: Government and Resistance since 1848* (Oxford, 1988), p.190.

Constabulary [were] admirably fitted to quell faction fights or riots'.³ Sir Francis Head in his book *A Fortnight in Ireland* maintained that: 'For the purpose of clearing away a mob.... it would be impossible for any undisciplined crowd to resist' [the constabulary].⁴ But others, perhaps less enamoured of the semi-military ethos of the force, begged to differ. One magistrate from Westmeath remarked:

I cannot understand how any one of a practical mind can for one moment advocate the use of a lumbering rifle in the hands of a policeman.... A policeman's battles are all at close quarters, and when it is necessary to arrest a troublesome ruffian, the rifles are so much in the constable's way as to give the delinquent a very important advantage.⁵

Events in Belfast over the next fifty years were to prove that this gentleman exhibited remarkable prescience.

Referring to earlier Belfast riots, Curtis spoke of 'the spark [which] set the northern flax on fire',⁶ and in 1872 that spark was effectively provided by the government. In 1871 Parliament repealed the Party Processions Act, a move which enabled Catholics and Protestants to once again take to the streets and openly parade their religious and political allegiances. Whilst the Protestant Twelfth of July celebrations passed off without incident, the Nationalist procession to press for Home Rule and the release of Fenian convicts was to herald the worst spate of rioting in Belfast since 1864. The Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin (or

³ *The Globe*, 12 March 1864.

⁴ F.B. Head, *A Fortnight in Ireland* (London, 1852), p.60.

⁵ *The Dublin Evening Mail*, 27 February 1866.

⁶ Curtis, *The History of the Royal Irish Constabulary*, p.123.

Lady Day) on 15 August was the day set for the march. By an unhappy coincidence this march would also signal the public inauguration of the Nationalist and Catholic Ancient Order of Hibernians, an organisation which in its exclusivity would become roughly analogous to the Orange Order. This seemed a provocative combination of Catholic sectarianism to the ill-disposed Protestant. The firebrand Presbyterian minister, Hugh Hanna of St. Enoch's, compounded that perceived provocation by informing his parishioners that their newly established church at Carlisle Circus was to be the target for a Nationalist attack on Lady Day. The stage was therefore set for a major confrontation.

Fearing serious disorder from the outset, the police and magistrates ordered significant reinforcements of soldiers and constabulary to be brought into the town. However, at a meeting in the Town Hall on the 14th the police and army quickly disagreed over the tactics to be used. Major General Warre 'recommended that, the police should be concentrated and moved in bodies.... [the Town Inspector] totally dissented from his views [believing that had Warre's] recommendation been acted upon the result must have proved disastrous'.⁷ This disagreement underscored previous difficulties with regard to the deployment of the army in Belfast.

Following the Belfast riots of 1864, both the Commission of Inquiry and the London press criticised the poor arrangements for keeping the peace.⁸ General Lord de Ros, in a subsequent letter to the Lord Lieutenant, argued that the Army and the

⁷ 'Military Aid to Civil Power', 27 August 1872 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1872).

⁸ *Report of the Commissioners of Inquiry, 1864, respecting the Magisterial and Police Jurisdiction arrangements and establishment of the Borough of Belfast* [3466], H.C. 1865, xxviii, 1 and *The Times*, 21 August 1864.

constabulary should learn from the success of their counterparts in London during the 1848 riots and develop better liaison and joint riot control techniques.⁹ Curtis had noted the disjuncture between police and military in the manner of their employment to suppress riots,¹⁰ and it was to bedevil efforts to control the town right up until the end of our period.

Despite the initial disagreement over tactics, there was nevertheless recognition by everyone at the meeting of the gravity of the situation, and representations were made to the Nationalist community to re-route the parade away from Carlisle Circus. An appeal by Catholic clergy fell on deaf ears and the march began at 9:00am the following morning. As the procession began its journey towards Carlisle Circus, it was halted by a contingent of police at Clifton Street, who, together with the Mayor, urged the marchers not to proceed. Their intervention was fortuitous, because the Protestant community in the adjacent street began stoning the parade. An exchange of stones began, but a swift intercession by the R.I.C. forced the two sides apart. In light of this skirmish, Joseph Biggar, the Chairman of the Belfast Home Rule Association who was leading the Nationalist parade, decided it was best to retrace their steps and adopt a different route. After a further attack on the procession, the marchers eventually arrived at the village of Hannahstown, just four miles distant from Belfast, for their meeting.

In the interim, large groups of Protestant shipyard workers gathered that afternoon to challenge the processionists as they returned from Hannahstown. The

⁹ Letter from Lord de Ros to Lord Lieutenant (Lord Wodehouse), 20 March 1865, Larcom Papers (N.L.I., MS 7627), f.22.

¹⁰ Curtis, *The History of the Royal Irish Constabulary*, p.123-4.

shipyard workers then fought the police as they successfully kept National marchers and Protestant workers apart. The events of Lady Day appeared to vindicate the timeliness of the R.I.C.'s intervention and the strategy adopted by the Town Inspector, E.L. Bailey. However, by midnight opposing Protestant and Catholic gangs had begun a series of riots that were to last for nine days.

The riots reached their height on the 17 August and the police commander, Deputy Inspector General Duncan¹¹ later characterised the situation thus:

in several parts of the town rival mobs were engaged in deadly conflict, firearms were freely used on both sides: the houses of unoffending persons were being wrecked: and disorder was apparent everywhere. The Police and Military endeavoured in vain on the days and nights of the 17th, 18th and 19th to clear the streets and suppress the riots.¹²

The Nationalist *Freeman's Journal* described the riots as 'wild and reckless savagery which would disgrace a community of cannibals' [maintaining the riots were] 'purely Orange outrages. The Catholics have been entirely blameless'.¹³ The English *Daily Telegraph* observed:

we have been too sanguine in permitting the repeal of the prohibition against the flaunting of party emblems and the marching of processions. The Belfast volcano has slumbered in quiet for eight years; but now we are forced to witness its

¹¹ The Town Inspector, E.L. Bailey had been injured during the rioting on 16 August and was incapacitated.

¹² Report from Deputy Inspector General to Inspector General, 27 August 1872 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1872/13155).

¹³ *FJ*, 19 August and 22 August 1872 respectively.

reviving fury.¹⁴

The staunchly Unionist *Belfast Newsletter* maintained that with regard to the riots:

there [were] extenuating circumstances.... because the Protestants have abundant proof that union [Home Rule] means injury to them, unless they are prepared to draw the sword to reassert those rights which have been so often challenged.¹⁵

The Belfast Newsletter was initially supportive of the police, not only praising them but also having a mild joke at one policeman's expense, who when struck by a dead cat, the paper believed, was not 'suffering very much from the assault'!¹⁶ Such jocular reportage was not to last and following a bloody weekend of violence the paper criticised the R.I.C., remarking that, 'the numbers of constabulary in the town on the commencement of the riots was totally inadequate'.¹⁷ One of the most notable riots during this weekend occurred in an open area used for brick manufacture, which separated the Catholic Falls Road and the Protestant Shankill Road. This area, known as the Brickfields, was the site of a pitched gun battle, which raged for four hours on the evening of Saturday 17 August. No satisfactory estimate of the casualties was made because many people were carried from the field and treated privately, but R.I.C. patrols apparently witnessed four fatalities.¹⁸ *The Belfast Newsletter* spoke of 'numerous ineffectual attempts.... by the police to subdue the riot [but claimed they found] it perfectly impossible to cope with the overwhelming

¹⁴ *The Daily Telegraph*, 21 August 1872.

¹⁵ *BNL*, 17 August 1872.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *BNL*, 19 August 1872.

¹⁸ A. Boyd, *Holy War in Belfast* (Tralee, 1969), p.116.

numbers who were fighting'.¹⁹ The "Battle of the Brickfields" spawned a poem²⁰ and became part of the town's folklore, but it was merely one of several horrendous engagements which took place between the riotous factions. One historian has described the weekend of 17 and 18 August as a 'time of unremitting terror'²¹ in Belfast, and plainly the authorities were overwhelmed by the violence. Deputy Inspector General Duncan subsequently admitted that: 'it was not until the arrival of 400 additional men (applied for on Monday) who arrived during Tuesday the 20th that effective measures could be taken to intercept the flying mobs'.²²

Despite the state of lawlessness that prevailed in West Belfast, the latent antagonism between the Protestant residents of that quarter and the police re-emerged. The respectable residents of the Shankill Road complained to the local Head Constable about his men firing on the crowds, whilst other residents alleged police brutality. *The Belfast Newsletter* noted:

There is a strong feeling of dissatisfaction with the conduct of the police in the locality; some of the residents affirming that but for the action of the constabulary in firing on the crowd, the riot would never have acquired the importance to which it attained.²³

These charges of brutal conduct by the R.I.C. were joined by accusations of police inactivity in the face of Catholic aggression, accusations which had the whiff of

¹⁹ *BNL*, 19 August 1872.

²⁰ See Appendix Two.

²¹ Boyd, *Holy War*, p.107.

²² Report from Deputy Inspector General to Inspector General, 27 August 1872 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1872/13155).

²³ *BNL*, 19 August 1872.

constabulary partiality:

No sooner had the Protestant party succeeded in driving their opponents into the Pound, than the large body of constabulary were marched up.... for the purpose of driving away those that were on the street. The police fired on the crowd....It is certainly strange that the constabulary and the military should have allowed this most reprehensible conduct to proceed as far as it did without endeavouring to put a stop to it, and then when the thing was over put in an appearance upon the scene....good many complain that similar conduct is pursued in other parts of the town.²⁴

As the riots took their toll, the Catholic *Ulster Examiner* pleaded with the authorities for more protection in Catholic areas and threatened 'a vigilance committee for the restoration of order'.²⁵ *The Belfast Newsletter* for its part made similar calls in Protestant areas and reported the active preparation of vigilance committees on the Shankill Road.²⁶ Relationships between the R.I.C. and many Protestants had soured to the extent that one 'old and valued public servant', a police sergeant living in the Sandy Row district, had his house wrecked and was savagely beaten.²⁷

However, by Wednesday 21 August the chorus of cries asking 'What are the authorities doing?' was tempered with the realisation that the authorities simply could not cope and that it was less a case of 'inaction' and more a case of 'non-

²⁴*Ibid.*, 20 August 1872. These views were also expressed in letters to the paper, see *BNL*, 19 August 1872.

²⁵ *Ulster Examiner*, 22 August 1872.

²⁶ *BNL*, 22 August 1872.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 21 August 1872.

success'.²⁸ But whilst these comments were being written, the combined forces of 1,569 policemen, military reinforcements of 1,101 cavalry and infantry, plus the resident and militia army battalions, were starting to bring some semblance of order to West Belfast. By 27 August, the Mayor, John Savage, felt sufficiently confident in the 'perfectly peaceful condition' of the town to recommend the withdrawal of the constabulary reinforcements.²⁹

The Freeman's Journal characterised the riots as 'the last fruits of the blood-stained tree of Orangeism'³⁰ and whilst there is little doubt that Protestants threw the first stones, both sides behaved with an animus towards each other which was sectarian and extremely violent. One of the worst aspects of the riots was the widespread intimidation meted out by both sides to homeowners and the subsequent wrecking by the mob of their vacated houses. This intimidation, which had begun during the 1857 riots, became 'a prominent feature of all future riots'³¹ in Belfast and ensured that segregation between the two religious communities was almost total by the beginning of the twentieth century. The 1872 riots displaced 837 families and 247 homes were destroyed. Public houses were also frequent targets and these, together with abandoned private dwellings, became the targets of widespread and systematic looting. A Catholic Sub Constable, Joseph Morton, was shot dead by Protestant rioters on 20 August in Norfolk Street. A married man with children,

²⁸ *FJ*, 22 August 1872 and *BNL*, 22 August 1872.

²⁹ Letter from John Savage to Under Secretary T.H. Burke, 27 August 1872 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1872/13113).

³⁰ *FJ*, 20 August 1872.

³¹ M. Elliott, *The Catholics of Ulster. A History* (London, 2000), p.355.

Morton was one of the country police reinforcements from Lisburn;³² seventy-three other policemen were seriously injured. Little is known of the precise number of civilian casualties, but at least 170 were reported as being injured, and there were thought to be many more.³³

Police tactics during the riots were initially successful, but it soon became abundantly clear that they were simply overwhelmed by the scale and ferocity of the crowd violence. Lack of numbers precluded decisive action almost from the outset; however, the press excoriation³⁴ heaped upon the constabulary was not entirely undeserved. Deputy Inspector General Duncan's report of the disturbances lamented the insufficiency of police numbers, but was quick to point out that the Belfast force had numbers which 'were inadequate for the performance of even their regular duties - and on the day of the Procession, and for some time previously there were forty vacancies'.³⁵ The numerical deficiency of the local force also had implications for the R.I.C. reinforcements, as Duncan noted:

The auxiliary force on their arrival were at once marched on duty, and could get no proper assistance from the men of the Town - to which most of those who arrived were perfect strangers. Hence, I found much confusion prevailing.³⁶

Poor briefing of the reinforcements was made worse by their continuous use without adequate food, rest and shelter. *The Belfast Newsletter* appeared to have some

³² Royal Irish Constabulary Personnel Register (P.R.O.(L), H.O., 184/1-48).

³³ Boyd, *Holy War*, p.116.

³⁴ *BNL*, 20 August 1872 and *FJ*, 19 August 1872.

³⁵ Report from Deputy Inspector General to Inspector General, 27 August 1872 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1872/13155).

³⁶ *Ibid.*



Plate Eight: The 1872 riots, wrecking shops and plundering spirit stores. Such scenes were an all too familiar part of Belfast's Victorian riots. Source: *The Illustrated London News*

sympathy for the plight of these men and on 19 August spoke of the constabulary 'on whom, perhaps, too much is expected.... running about in every direction, and this while many of them are suffering from want of proper rest and long fasting'.³⁷ By 21 August 1872 the paper reported that some men had been on duty since 15 August under conditions of 'extraordinary fatigue and frequently long fasting.... oftentimes obtain [ing] only a few minutes out of eighteen or twenty hours to snatch a morsel of food'.³⁸ The R.I.C. acknowledged the difficulty of arranging relief of duty with limited manpower,³⁹ but as Inspector General Reed later recalled in his memoirs,⁴⁰ it had always been so, although that did not make it any the less of a problem.

Aside from these direct concerns which affected police morale, there was the less obvious, but nonetheless relevant issue of R.I.C. morale generally. A groundswell of support expressed in both parliament and the press⁴¹ had been building during the first half of 1872 for the force to receive better pay and conditions of service. That sympathy was coupled with criticisms of both the Inspector General's stewardship and the 'illiberal scale of pay of the Royal Irish Constabulary as compared with that of other Police forces'.⁴² The Inspector General feared the impact that 'numerous resignations [and] retarded recruiting' was having on the very fabric of the R.I.C.,

³⁷ *BNL*, 19 August 1872.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 21 August 1872.

³⁹ Report from Deputy Inspector General to Inspector General, 27 August 1872 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1872/13155).

⁴⁰ Sir Andrew Reed, *Recollection of my Life* (1911), p.31.123 page typescript in the possession of Reed's grandson. Microfilm copy in the possession of Professor E.L.Malcolm, University of Melbourne.

⁴¹ *The Belfast Morning News*, 8 July 1872.

⁴² Report from Sir John Stewart Wood, Inspector General, to Marquis of Hartington, 13 June 1872 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1872/8456).

and in a move clearly designed to hasten government action he sent an urgent missive to the Chief Secretary complete with press cuttings showing press 'agitation' in support of the men.⁴³ However, the government was aware of the serious nature of constabulary discontent. They were, for example, sufficiently concerned by the alleged existence of an American society to assist R.I.C. emigration that the British Consulate General in New York was asked to investigate the matter.⁴⁴

In a scathing and lengthy editorial, *The Belfast Newsletter* joined the 'agitation', insisting that the voice of the men themselves be heard, rather than 'the evidence [of the] Officers alone'.⁴⁵ Characterising the R.I.C. as 'the most neglected, worst remunerated branch of the public service', the paper went on to describe the state of the police reinforcements still in the town:

Whatever excuse there may have been for neglect during the riots, that excuse has vanished, and it is shameful to see the manner in which the men are disposed of. They are kept in what are called straw lodges, and miserable lodges they are.... some of them - destitute of personal comfort, and dangerous to health. We are informed that the health of several of those located in the straw lodges is much impaired; and we have been told that three of the men are at this moment dangerously ill. Who is to blame, and why is such an objectionable system continued?⁴⁶

The problem of sub standard accommodation for men on detached duty was not just

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Letter from Acting Consul General, Pierrepoint Edwards, to The Right Honourable Earl Gravelle, Foreign Office, 25 July 1872 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1872/2111).

⁴⁵ *BNL*, 26 September 1872.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

a Belfast issue; it was a bone of contention throughout the force.⁴⁷ In the main, the blame lay squarely with the officers, many of whom, whilst attending carefully to their own needs, seemed to adopt a policy of neglect when it came to the welfare of the men. A former officer, George Garrow-Green, later admitted that this neglect was prevalent and on 6 June 1891 Inspector General Andrew Reed was driven to issuing an official edict in an attempt to rectify the situation.⁴⁸ The government appointed a Commission of Inquiry in 1873⁴⁹ to look into the condition of the force and to recommend changes. Favourable measures over pay and conditions of service ensued. For example, a head constable received an extra seven shillings per week, an R.I.C. constable received a weekly rise of nine shillings and these ‘considerable increase[s] of pay’ benefited all ranks.⁵⁰ The 1873 pay settlements helped to stabilise morale in the force until the onset of the Land War (1879-1882).

Given the niggardly way the rank and file were treated and their contemporary state of morale, it is little wonder that their performance during the riots was not of the highest order. To exacerbate matters, there were faults in the way the men were

⁴⁷ See B.J. Griffin, “The Irish Police, 1836-1914: A Social History” (unpublished PhD. dissertation, Loyola University of Chicago, 1990), pp.378-382. This was compounded by notoriously insufficient allowances and the widespread custom by provisions vendors and landlords of overcharging policemen whilst on detached duty.

⁴⁸ G. Garrow - Green, *In the Royal Irish Constabulary* (London, 1905), pp.131-132 and Royal Irish Constabulary circulars, August 1882 - July 1900 (N.L.I., IR 3522 R3, Code Amendment 6 June 1891), p.1.

⁴⁹ *Report of the Commissioners appointed by the Lord Commissioners of Her Majesty’s Treasury to enquire into the condition of the Civil Service in Ireland on the Royal Irish constabulary: Together with the minutes of Evidence and Appendix* [C831], H.C. and H.L. 1873, xxii, 131.

⁵⁰ *Report of the Committee of Inquiry into the Royal Irish Constabulary: With Evidence and Appendix*, [C3577], H.C. and H.L. 1883, xxxii, 255, p.259.

positioned on the streets, often leading to accusations that they were inactive or unwilling to intervene.⁵¹ The primary fault lay in their being assigned to fixed positions rather than actively patrolling and breaking up crowds before these became a threat to the peace. This tactical defect is perhaps illustrative of a broader problem where the tactics governing the police in riots were concerned. The contemporary R.I.C. drill manual emphasised the light infantry model as an exemplar and, whilst the formation of Rallying Squares⁵² to resist enemy cavalry may have been useful in a rural context, such outmoded tactics were useless in the narrow cobbled streets of Belfast. For example, when charges were made the crowds simply melted away into adjoining side streets and then stoned the police over the low roofs of the houses.

The Times highlighted the difficulties facing the Belfast R.I.C in 1872:

They can fling stones....and if the police appear can run through the houses, and crossing the boundaries, appear in a totally different place with wonderful rapidity. A man with a loaded pistol fires into a crowd....and immediately plunging into a narrow entry or through one of the small houses, passes into another street, and there may stand looking at the constables with an air of innocence. They are trained in such tactics.... It is right to allude to the special difficulties of the task, as it must be thought extraordinary that the disturbances have not been long since suppressed.⁵³

⁵¹ *BNL*, 20 August and 22 August 1872 and *FJ*, 21 August and 22 August 1872.

⁵² H.J. Brownrigg, *A Manual of drill for the constabulary force of Ireland* (Dublin, 1859), p.73. For an examination of the military background of the force see E.L. Malcolm, 'From Light Infantry to Constabulary: the military origins of the Irish police, 1798 - 1850', *The Irish Sword*, xxi, 84 (1998), pp.163 - 175.

⁵³ *The Times*, 22 August 1872.

Such mob tactics together with a ready supply of “petrified kidney” cobblestones frequently rendered the police impotent.

Little awareness was shown by the constabulary authorities about the problems that faced the men on the ground and as *The Belfast Newsletter* pointed out: ‘The conduct of the constabulary was gallant and cool, but it was exceedingly difficult for a bystander to see the propriety of the manner in which they were handled’.⁵⁴ On the occasion when Sub Constable Morton was shot, none of his colleagues were given the order to load their rifles until the rioters had fired two separate volleys; such crass incompetence cost Morton his life.⁵⁵ Apparently not given to introspection, the R.I.C. command failed to consider that either their leadership or tactics may have been at fault, merely that the permanent augmentation of the Belfast Town force required ‘immediate consideration’,⁵⁶ and so it was left to the Army to provide a critique of the R.I.C.’s performance.

The relationship between the Army and R.I.C. was already strained before the commencement of the riots and a contretemps between a 78th Highlanders’ officer and an R.I.C. Sub Inspector during the riots⁵⁷ aggravated matters. Therefore, not surprisingly, the Army commander’s overall assessment of the R.I.C. was a gloomy one and he recommended the:

due cooperation of constabulary and military according to their respective

⁵⁴ *BNL*, 20 August 1872.

⁵⁵ *FJ*, 23 August 1872.

⁵⁶ Report from Deputy Inspector General to Inspector General, 27 August 1872 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1872/13155).

⁵⁷ Report from Sub Inspector H.L. Owen to Inspector General, 26 August 1872 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1872).

attributes [and that] the constabulary.... act rather in a police sense for the suppression of riot than in a military one, the baton being thus preferred to the police carbine and the bayonet; the precaution of supporting the constables by an armed force never being lost sight of.... this mode of using police, which is thoroughly understood in London and Dublin, is not so well grasped by the constabulary when employed, as at Belfast during the late disturbances.⁵⁸

The author of the critique, Lord Sandhurst, did make clear, however, that before police reinforcements arrived:

fatigue and never - ceasing duty [was] a fair explanation of many of the current stories to the disadvantage of the constabulary.... the whole body [being] kept perpetually on duty, numbers of them not having left their post.... for 60 hours, and this in the midst of highly irritated and hostile crowds [although, he added] the recent riots were not of so serious a character as those of 1864.⁵⁹

Sandhurst's remarks echoed those of the Westmeath magistrate at the beginning of this chapter and as one English observer tartly remarked:

To any Englishman who has passed through the late riots in this town it will be palpable that the murderous sword - bayonets and rifles of the Royal Irish Constabulary are not, by any means, adapted to aid them in quelling an *e'meute*.... But were the Royal Irish in this town armed with strong batons similar to those used by the London police.... the ends of the preservers of law and order would be

⁵⁸ Lord Sandhurst, *Minute by the Right Honourable Lord Sandhurst, G.C.B., G.C.S.I., Commander of the Forces, &c, &c. Belfast Riots - Means for Suppression, &c.* (Dublin, 1872) (N.L.I., IR 32341, P49), pp. 6 and 2.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

attained in a shorter time, and in a manner more consistent with our constitutional habits.⁶⁰

The fact was that there was little difference between the batons of the R.I.C. and those of the London Metropolitan Police, it was merely a question of the R.I.C.'s own tactics and mindset. In 1867 the police had quelled a Fenian rebellion by military action and gained a Royal prefix in the process; less than five years later a force imbued with such semi-militarism was being expected to respond to urban riots in a wholly civil police manner. It was a quantum leap in both strategy and attitude that the R.I.C. was reluctant or incapable of performing. Elsewhere in Ireland it was expected to 'remove some of the outward appearance of depending on Troops for the government of Ireland',⁶¹ and, as Inspector General Brownrigg argued,⁶² until the Irish countryside was perceived as more quiescent by government, the R.I.C. would have to remain a rural *gendarmarie*. This, as we shall see in the next chapter, would have weighty consequences for the constabulary in Belfast.

Unsurprisingly, the Belfast Council in its first meeting after the riots had few kind words to say about the constabulary's performance. Almost from the outset the sub-text of its agenda was the replacement of the current force, in order to 'have the police made local' and more accountable to the council.⁶³ The issue of the appointment of special constables was raised, but the Mayor made plain this was one

⁶⁰ *BNL*, 27 August 1872.

⁶¹ Memorandum on the Irish Constabulary Force by Lord de Ros, February 1857 (N.L.I., M.S. 7617), f.8.

⁶² Sir H.J. Brownrigg, *Examination of some Recent Allegations concerning the constabulary force of Ireland in a report to his Excellency the Lord Lieutenant* (Dublin, 1864).

⁶³ *BNL*, 3 September 1872.

question he did not want to re-examine. The R.I.C.'s numerical insufficiency, slow and uneven response, unfamiliarity with the terrain, over reaction and semi-militarism were among the issues most oft cited, but due note was taken of the dislocation caused by Town Inspector Bailey's incapacity. At the culmination of the meeting the Council resolved to ask for a royal commission of inquiry. On 20 September the Council memorialised the Lord Lieutenant 'praying for a commission of inquiry relative to the late riots in Belfast' and on 10 December presented a 'list of queries regarding the number, organisation and distribution of the Constabulary' to Town Inspector Bailey, preparatory to forming a council committee 'to inquire into and report on the subject'.⁶⁴

On 6 January 1873 Lord Hartington, the Chief Secretary, replied to the Council memorial, refusing to countenance an inquiry but suggesting a number of changes for the future. These suggestions took the form of a report distilled from representatives of the government in Belfast.⁶⁵ The Hartington Report castigated the town magistracy for the inefficient and irresponsible role it played in organising the forces at its disposal, both prior to and during their deployment on the streets. It also made recommendations for a titular Commissioner of Police, solely responsible for R.I.C. operations, and an emergency triumvirate of the Mayor, Town Inspector and General Officer Commanding troops (G.O.C.), together with magistrates, to sit in

⁶⁴ Town Clerk's Letter Book, (P.R.O.N.I., LA/7/29AA/3), p.821 and p.890.

⁶⁵This report has been lost in the transfer of records from Belfast City Hall to the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland. Investigations as to its whereabouts are ongoing and this author's account of the Hartington Report is based on I. Budge and C. O'Leary's book, *Belfast: Approach to Crisis: A Study of Belfast Politics 1613-1970* (London, 1973) pp. 86-7 and C. Townshend, *Political Violence in Ireland: Government and Resistance since 1848* (Oxford, 1988), p. 87.

continuous sessions until rioting ceased. Further suggestions included the use of county police detachments and R.M.s to quell disorder and the employment of militia only as a weapon of last resort. Hartington's report culminated in a swingeing attack on the lackadaisical attitude of the magistrates in failing to disperse potentially rowdy crowds before riots occurred.

This was a disagreeable report for the council to swallow and they rejected its contents almost entirely. At an extraordinary meeting on 10 January, the council reiterated its demand for an inquiry and criticised the 'Government police force' which despite its great expense to the town had left,

the lives and property of the inhabitants.... quite unprotected that it is not an increase in the police force of the Borough that is required so much as a complete change in the semi-military character in arms, discipline, organisation and management of the present force.⁶⁶

Hartington refused this second demand from the council, although he was prepared to entertain constructive proposals for the improvement of the Belfast force. The silence from the council thereafter was deafening. It is clear that their agenda was actually the return of the "Bulkies" rather than the reform of the R.I.C.

Three years later, in 1876, the Lady Day celebrations became the focus of another bout of rioting in Belfast. Sporadic stone throwing began as the procession left for the field at Hannahstown and also greeted the processionists on their return. More serious rioting occurred that evening and twenty civilians and six policemen were injured. But the riots did not assume a more critical aspect as a result of the 'timely

⁶⁶Quoted in Budge and O'Leary, *Belfast: Approach to Crisis*, p.87.

interference of the constabulary'.⁶⁷ However, clashes continued on 16 August both outside the Coombe and Barbour foundry and as the bands departed from the railway terminal, although the R.I.C. were able to cope despite being 'very badly used'.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, it was feared that the situation might worsen and the following day further R.I.C. men joined the Belfast force from various police divisions in Ireland. At this point *The Freeman's Journal* described the situation as 'more a scene of rabble versus police than Catholics versus Protestants,' as the crowd displayed 'great violence' towards the R.I.C.⁶⁹ The reinforcements, which numbered some 444 officers and men, were given the sobriquet "country police" and subjected to vilification both on the streets and in the columns of *The Belfast Newsletter*.⁷⁰ Their appearance on the streets was nonetheless effective and, although intermittent rioting continued for a day or so, the danger had passed and the town was quiescent by 21 August.

On that day a substantial meeting of the Shankill Road ratepayers was held in Agnes Street Hall and two resolutions were passed:

declaring that the conduct of the police drafted into Belfast and doing duty in the streets on the evenings of the 15th, 16th, and 17th instant, was such as to call forth the indignation of not only the loyal and peaceable inhabitants of the Shankill Road district, but of all the other districts in the borough [and] to obtain and collect evidence of the cowardly and wanton acts perpetrated by the constabulary,

⁶⁷*BNL*, 16 August 1876.

⁶⁸*FJ*, 17 August 1876.

⁶⁹*FJ*, 18 August 1876.

⁷⁰*BNL*, 22 August 1876.

with a view to have such evidence published and laid before Parliament.⁷¹

Despite the indignation occasioned at the meeting by the activities of the “country police”, there was little substantive evidence to suggest that they acted other than firmly with the riotous elements on the Shankill Road. Derided as ‘turf cutter [s], [this] black brigade’ were to the Protestant residents and letter writers of the Shankill, merely Catholic interlopers. When one speaker at the meeting praised the ‘old local force’ and demanded ‘a change in the police system’, to rapturous applause, his agenda and that of the council perceptibly merged.⁷²

Police reinforcements during the 1872 riots had not carried batons with them, despite the R.I.C. code requiring that all men on detached duty be armed with truncheons, in addition to firearms and side-arms, and ‘that at least one-third of the party....[be] armed with truncheons only’.⁷³ That the code was ignored in 1872 doubtless led to its reiteration subsequently, but R.I.C. preference for the use of firearms on many occasions was to lead to what was later described as ‘heart-rending bloodshed in our city’.⁷⁴ As a result of the accidental fatal shooting of a child by police in Lurgan during a riot in August 1879, the Chief Secretary W.E. Forster introduced buckshot ammunition for R.I.C. Snider rifles the following year. This measure had been suggested by a Tullamore R.M., Champagne Lestrangle, in March 1879 to try and achieve, according to Richard Hawkins, some ‘additional gradation

⁷¹*Ibid.*

⁷²*Ibid.*

⁷³*Standing Rules and Regulations for the Government and Guidance of the Royal Irish Constabulary* (3rd ed., Dublin, 1872) Section 643 and (4th ed., Dublin, 1888), p.37.

⁷⁴Colonial Office: Ireland: Confidential Print: Irish Crimes Record 1887-93, Intelligence Notes, Misc. Series VII (P.R.O.(L), C.O., 903/3), p.19.

of physical force [and, although it] was the only notable technical advance in riot control during this period',⁷⁵ it was nevertheless a well intentioned measure.

The adoption of buckshot cartridges, which the code insisted should be the first choice of ammunition,⁷⁶ was swiftly put to use in the town in a deadly repetition of 15 August 1876. On 15 August 1880, three hundred extra police were drafted in to cope with the tit-for-tat bouts of disorder that occurred over three days. Protestant crowds attacked marchers returning from their Lady Day demonstration at Dover and Boundary Street, two streets between the Falls and Shankill. *The Freeman's Journal* painted a particularly vivid picture of one clash during which the police did not resort to the use of buckshot:

Towards the police, across the green, from the Protestant side, advanced a rabble of men, women, and boys. They appeared to be stooping continuously, and flinging something, and the lively movements of the police from one side to the other showed that they were under fire and subject to a volley of stones.... The sub-inspector drew his sword and waved it; his men took a firm grip of their batons and tucked back their cuffs in an ominous manner; then six mounted [police] men dashed up a side road, and the word was given to charge. Away went the horses right at the stone-throwers, their riders wheeling their swords in the air, and away went the stone-throwers tumbling one over the other.... The police, who had run in a compact line at first, had now tailed off in column formation, the stouter men at a gentle trot.... the more athletic constables running at top speed

⁷⁵R. Hawkins, 'An Army on Police Work, 1881-2 Ross of Bladensburg's Memorandum', *The Irish Sword*, xi, no.43 (Winter, 1973), p.81.

⁷⁶*Standing Rules and Regulations*, 1888, p.38.

into the enemy. Yells and screams rose on the air, and brickbats were fired from the house into which the rioters had fled. Two constables, with the young man they had captured, retired in good order on the Falls-road. The Catholic party received them with great cheering, but almost immediately afterwards pounced on the police. Both constables were knocked down, and their prisoners rescued....⁷⁷

The stone throwing again commenced, and some windows were broken. The police rushed hither and thither, but every house was a place of escape for the stone-throwers. Doors were slammed in the faces of the constables and they were roundly abused by the women, who in most cases led the assaults. This sort of thing lasted a long time - a charge on the part of the police, a retreat on the part of the mob, followed by a rally, and the police then retiring to their original position. Occasionally the horse police would ride at full speed up a street, riding on the pavement, and slashing at every door-way. A few captures were made now and again.⁷⁸

Both *The Belfast Newsletter* and *The Freeman's Journal* were unanimous in their praise⁷⁹ of the R.I.C.'s handling of the riots, even if they were forced, as they did on at least one occasion, 'to return the compliment by discharging similar missiles'⁸⁰ at the stone-throwers! Buckshot was employed at times during the riots, and one local R.M. thought its usage highly efficacious, because he believed: 'We will now make sure that the most guilty will be those who will be reached, whereas bullets

⁷⁷ Attempts at prisoner rescue were a commonplace in Belfast riots, see for example, *FJ*, 18 August 1880 or 14 July 1884.

⁷⁸ *FJ*, 17 August 1880.

⁷⁹ *BNL*, 17, 18 and 19 August 1880 and *FJ*, 20 August 1880.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 17 August 1880.

frequently pass these and kill innocent people - women and children - hundreds of yards beyond'.⁸¹ The first operational use of the new ammunition in Belfast had been adjudged a success, but its subsequent employment was to illustrate its limitation.

On 13 July 1884, in a 'curtain-raiser for the riots of 1886',⁸² Catholics in the Carrick Hill area stoned an Orange lodge demonstration each time it passed the locale. Successful police efforts to contain the disorder and the subsequent arrest of over thirty offenders led to the R.I.C. becoming the 'proper objects of revenge'⁸³ in a series of savage attacks by Carrick Hill residents. The police managed to contain the trouble, which was more or less confined to Carrick Hill and its immediate environs, although four policemen and at least eight civilians were injured during the day's rioting. In a textbook example of what could be achieved using the baton and arrest technique, police netted at least twenty rioters in a trap in Wall Street and earned the fulsome praise of *The Belfast Newsletter* in the process.⁸⁴

However, *The Freeman's Journal*, although admitting that the police had made 'many arrests [and had] suffered considerably at the hands of the rioters on both sides',⁸⁵ nevertheless chose to criticise the R.I.C. It remarked that 'the arrangements made for preserving the peace were much commented on, either a police retreat or the brutal use of the baton'.⁸⁶ *The Journal's* corrective to *The Newsletter* aside, the R.I.C. seemed to have contained the 1884 riots successfully.

⁸¹*Hansard* 3, Volume CCLV, 3 August to 24 August 1880, p.1853, Mr. W.E. Forster.

⁸²Budge and O'Leary, *Belfast: Approach to Crisis*, p.87.

⁸³*BNL*, 14 July 1884.

⁸⁴*Ibid*, 14 July 1884.

⁸⁵*FJ*, 14 July 1884.

⁸⁶*Ibid*.

If the R.I.C. tasted the fruits of success in 1884, they were to swallow the bitter pill of failure two years later. The importance of the 1886 riots in any study of the R.I.C. cannot be overstated. One Commissioner, T.J. Smith, later remarked that as a consequence of the riots: 'The hostility to the police has never since died out'.⁸⁷ Therefore these riots are covered separately and in detail in the next chapter.

Following the 1886 riots, the next serious riot to afflict Victorian Belfast occurred in 1893. Like its predecessor, this riot took place in an atmosphere of high political tension in consequence of the presentation of the second Home Rule Bill to Parliament on 13 February 1893. The Divisional Commissioner's Confidential Report for that month read:

The eyes of all Ulster are now concentrated on Belfast and the action taken in that City. Should the peace be broken there, riots I anticipate will as a matter of course follow in such places as Lurgan, Dungannon & C. which are in entire sympathy with Belfast.⁸⁸

His immediate subordinate, the police commander of County Antrim, was no less apprehensive, believing that: 'It is generally thought that an outbreak of the Orangemen in Belfast may at any moment take place'.⁸⁹

Despite such dire prophecies, trouble when it did occur started on 21 April and lasted less than a week. The first clashes began between rival crowds on the Shankill Road and in Ballymacarrett, but the police, with military support, were able to cope

⁸⁷Report from T.J. Smith, Commissioner to Inspector General Sir Neville Chamberlain, 29 August 1912 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1912/59512.)

⁸⁸Crime Branch Special: Confidential Monthly Report of the Divisional Commissioner for February 1893 (P.R.O.(L), C.O., 904/48), f.538.

⁸⁹*Ibid.*, f.543.

during the two nights of sectarian rioting in that area. On 24 April, a number of Catholic workmen were assaulted at breakfast time in the Queen's Island shipyard by their Protestant co-workers. These attacks were calculated to intimidate rather than maim and at dinner hour the police, together with military pickets, were posted at 120-yard intervals along the Queen's Road which passed the works, 'so that any one seeking protection could claim it openly or proceed to the city under police protection'.⁹⁰ Further riots occurred that evening in the streets abutting the Shankill and Crumlin roads, but the rapid use of military pickets in aid of the R.I.C. quashed the riots during that night.

Although the Bishop of Down and Connor made accusations 'of partiality and incompetency against the police' regarding their role at the shipyard,⁹¹ both government and the R.I.C. believed the containment of the disturbances had been a success and they dismissed the allegations. Police attempts to take a more pro-active role in the shipyard disputes would, as the Chief Secretary rightly indicated, 'do more harm than good'⁹² and, as the Protestant workers were in the overwhelming majority in the yards, police interference would have involved a major conflict beyond the means of the R.I.C. to control.

The mistakes of 1886 were not repeated in 1893: county police were only used to cover town police shortfalls, batons were used effectively and a good number of arrests were made, the dispositions of both the R.I.C. and the cavalry and infantry were flexible and 'the **prompt** [my emphasis] use of the military, both on Queen's

⁹⁰ *Hansard 4*, Volume XI, 11 April to 3 May 1893, p.1142, Mr. Asquith.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p.1490, Mr. J. Morley.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p.1486, Mr. J. Morley.

Road and in the town on the first sign of rioting, prevented an outbreak similar to that of 1886'.⁹³

Tensions engendered by the Home Rule Bill affected not only Belfast's citizens but also its policemen. The bill contained a number of clauses which reserved sections of the future Irish administration to imperial government control, and the R.I.C. was one of those permanently reserved. However, other clauses and the Fifth and Sixth Schedules of the Home Rule Bill contained detailed plans for the dismantling of the R.I.C. over a period of six years under an incumbent Irish executive.⁹⁴ These clauses were bad enough for the Belfast men, but the withholding by government of the second part of Schedule Six, which dealt with R.I.C. pensions, caused a 'widespread feeling of dissatisfaction among the Constabulary at the uncertainty of their position'.⁹⁵ The County Inspector of Antrim spoke of the feelings of the Belfast policemen thus:

The men & officers feel strongly that faith has been broken with them by the exclusion from the Home Rule Bill of the terms regarding pensions etc. In fact the purposed measure has had a very disorganizing effect and it is very hard to know what may happen should an outbreak [of rioting] occur.⁹⁶

While these remarks by the R.I.C. may, like their predictions on future city riots, be

⁹³ 'Disturbances in Belfast 1912', Report from T.J. Smith, Commissioner to Inspector General Sir Neville Chamberlain, 29 August 1912 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1912/59512).

⁹⁴ *Government of Ireland Officers and Police, Clauses and Fifth and Sixth Schedules*. CXXX (2) 6th February 1893, Bryce Papers (N.L.I., MS 11,009 (4)).

⁹⁵ Crime Branch Special: Confidential Monthly Report of the Divisional Commissioner for February 1893 (P.R.O.(L), C.O., 904/48), f.539.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, f.543.

overly pessimistic and represent a measure of special pleading, nevertheless, Arthur Balfour, when Chief Secretary, had warned the R.I.C. 'that their careers and their pensions might be sacrificed under the Home Rule policy'.⁹⁷ This, when set against some of the more aggressive, anti-police speeches by Nationalist M.P.s.⁹⁸ created a climate of fear and apprehension in the force. There was a great deal of discussion about the police schedules in the newspapers and 'the debates on the clauses concerning the administration contained little that was statesmanlike'.⁹⁹ Doubtless the defeat of the Home Rule Bill by the House of Lords on 8 September was not only a joy for Unionists, but for a good number of Belfast "peelers" too. No doubt breathing a collective sigh of relief, the 12th of July celebrations were for the police and the Protestants 'the most peaceable and orderly in that city for many years'.¹⁰⁰

The 12 July Orange demonstrations of the following year were marked by a minor series of disturbances when Catholics attacked Protestants at Beechfield, North Queen Street and Carrick Hill Corner on Clifton Street. Compared to previous occasions these disorders were fairly tame, but as one local newspaper had astutely observed years before: 'Crowds in Belfast are notoriously dangerous, for here a crowd rapidly becomes a mob, and out of a mob comes a riot.... and our riots are hard to quell'.¹⁰¹ Therefore, speed in crowd control was of the essence, and by the

⁹⁷ C.B. Shannon, *Arthur J. Balfour and Ireland 1874-1922* (Washington, 1988), p.65.

⁹⁸ L.W. McBride, *The Greening of Dublin Castle. The Transformation of Bureaucratic and Judicial Personnel in Ireland, 1892-1922* (Washington, 1991), p.57.

⁹⁹ *The Daily News*, 14 January 1893 and *Ibid.*, p.58.

¹⁰⁰ Colonial Office: Ireland: Confidential Print: Irish Crimes Record 1887-93, Intelligence Notes, Misc. Series XIII (P.R.O.(L), C.O., 903/3), p.10.

¹⁰¹ *Northern Whig* (hereafter *NW*), 15 August 1861.

end of the 12th the constabulary had achieved a measure of order which as the R.I.C. pointed out 'was due not to the desire for peace on the part of the people, but to the action and disposition of the police'.¹⁰²

The disturbances of 1896 were probably more memorable for the rancour they caused between the executive and the Belfast council than for any damage done to the city or its populace, and that dispute and its origins are fully discussed in Chapter I. Nonetheless, feelings had been 'very bad'¹⁰³ between the two communities over a Nationalist procession demanding an amnesty for Irish political prisoners which was due to take place at Hannahstown on 17 August. The first clashes occurred in the immediate aftermath of the Lady Day celebrations and were, according to *The Irish News*, 'not of sufficient extent to give cause for concern' and the R.I.C. considered them as being 'of a trivial nature [swiftly quashed by the] prompt action of the Police in the different districts'.¹⁰⁴ Trouble ensued when the erection of a Nationalist arch at the lower end of Little George's Street provoked a reaction by the Protestant community in the upper part of the street and this sparked small scale disturbances which spread through York Street and Ballymacarrett. This disorder, which lasted less than a day, did not impact on the conduct of the amnesty march which began at 10.15 a.m. on 17 August.

The constabulary, represented by Head Constable Benjamin Good, applied at Belfast Petty Sessions that morning to have the parade re-routed away from its

¹⁰² Colonial Office: Ireland: Confidential Print: Irish Crimes Record 1887-93, Intelligence Notes, Misc. Series VII (P.R.O.(L),C.O., 903/4) p.12.

¹⁰³ 'Alleged Disturbances in the City on August 15th', 17 August 1896 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1912/11935/14161).

¹⁰⁴ *IN*, 17 August 1896 and *Ibid*.

original path through Great Edward, Victoria and High Streets to prevent ‘bloodshed and riot’.¹⁰⁵ The police application was successful, notwithstanding ‘the determined opinion’¹⁰⁶ of the Mayor against the R.I.C. application, and the procession, which eventually swelled to several thousand, proceeded to Hannahstown via a less contentious route. The R.I.C., who were described as being ‘here, there, and everywhere’ by one newspaper,¹⁰⁷ were nevertheless insufficiently ubiquitous to prevent desultory clashes between the processionists and hostile onlookers at Donegall Place, Chichester Street and later at Andersonstown. The Hannahstown meeting itself concluded peacefully and the return to Belfast proper was uneventful. A minor skirmish occurred that evening in North Street, but apart from that, a portentous day finished relatively quietly. That it did so was undoubtedly due to the actions of the R.I.C.

The constabulary arrangements were praised as being, ‘most satisfactory’, ‘beautifully complex’, ‘effectual’, ‘of the completest and most elaborate character’ and one paper concluded that ‘the police arrangements were such as to make anything in the nature of a riot impossible’, while individual police actions were variously described as ‘decisive’, ‘prompt’, ‘watchful’ ‘tribute [being] due to them’.¹⁰⁸ It was a heady mix of superlatives for a constabulary so often vilified in the past, but examination of all the accounts of the day show the police did actually do

¹⁰⁵ ‘Petty Sessions (Ireland) Act, 1851, 14 & 15 Vict., Cap. 93. (Form A a) Information, 17 August 1896 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1912/11935).

¹⁰⁶ Memorandum from E. Seddall to Inspector General, 21 August 1896 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1912/14673)

¹⁰⁷ *Ulster Echo*, 18 August 1896.

¹⁰⁸ Respectively, *NW*, *IN*, *BNL* and *BET* 18 August 1896, *BET*, 17 August 1896, *IN*, *BNL*, 18 August 1896, *BET*, 17 August 1896 and *BNL*, 18 August 1896.

their job extremely well.

Four hundred constables were used to police the march and all its connected events, with policemen posted at each potential trouble spot in strength and at each street corner. Local detectives and plain-clothes men escorted the procession to both check that the marchers did not deviate from the correct route and to spot known troublemakers. County police reinforcements were used, but as armed escorts at the tail end of the procession on its route into and out of Belfast. Although some R.I.C. men were seen carrying rifles, the majority seemed to be armed with batons only and these were used wholly and effectively throughout the disturbances. Some 100 plain-clothes policemen and detectives were deployed throughout the city under the command of Detective Head Constable Hussey and these men mingled with the crowds. They 'wore sticks of a particularly heavy calibre' and took an active part in the suppression of disorder, suffering casualties in the process.¹⁰⁹ The employment of plain-clothes men and detectives was not new - they had been used during the 1886 riots - but never before in such numbers and in such an organised way. Three hundred troops were on immediate notice to move from their barracks in the city, but prompt action in strength by the R.I.C. rendered their deployment unnecessary.

The R.I.C. seemed happy with their performance. District Inspector Seddall remarked that 'the police acted at every point with energy and determination - but at the same time with moderation and good temper' and Belfast's new police Commissioner Thomas Moriarty expressed 'the highest approval of the courage, tact,

¹⁰⁹ *BET*, 17 August 1896 and *IN*, 18 August 1896.

and discipline of the men under the most trying circumstances'.¹¹⁰ However, one newspaper slightly spoiled the self congratulatory atmosphere by remarking that the R.I.C. had not arrested enough miscreants, believing it was 'not sufficient to keep the rival mobs apart'.¹¹¹ Another newspaper commented on the volume of cases before the Custody Court as being 'the smallest for a considerable time'¹¹² and *The Irish News* highlighted the paucity of arrests in its columns, although the tone of its complaint implies it was more an exhortation to the police to arrest more Protestants rather than constructive criticism.¹¹³ Nevertheless, these papers did have a specious argument. The level of arrests were in the low teens, but this may have simply been the R.I.C. demonstrating a measure of unwillingness to exacerbate a potentially explosive situation by heavy handed or wholesale arrests.

1898 was to prove more of a trial to the R.I.C. than 1896. In March 1898 the Inspector General wrote in his Monthly Confidential Report: 'Certain disturbances in Belfast on St. Patrick's night were in a measure alarming as indicating a dangerous spirit existing between the Orange Party and the Nationalists who propose to demonstrate in Belfast in memory of 1798'.¹¹⁴ That 'dangerous spirit', which had so alarmed Andrew Reed, next manifested itself in what *The Belfast Newsletter*

¹¹⁰ 'Nationalist Demonstration in Belfast on 1-8-96', 18 August 1896 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1912/11935/4273) and 'Nationalist Demonstration in Belfast', 18 August 1896 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1912/11935/14186).

¹¹¹ *NW*, 19 August 1896.

¹¹² *BET*, 17 August 1896.

¹¹³ *IN*, 19 August 1896.

¹¹⁴ Crime Branch Special: Inspector General's Monthly Confidential Report for March 1898. County Inspectors Reports annexed (P.R.O.(L), C.O., 904/68), f.140.

described as a 'preliminary'¹¹⁵ to the centenary demonstration, when trouble occurred in the Millfield area on 23 May. A large crowd, headed by the Nationalist Henry Joy McCracken Band, had assembled at North Queen Street and when passing the corner of Peter's Hill and North Street attacked some Protestant onlookers. The R.I.C. intervened and were stoned by the marchers. The police charged the troublemakers and made five arrests. Upon their return the processionists once again attacked the constabulary and nearby Protestants and the police were obliged to disperse the mob with batons. On this occasion the force was able to contain the 'very violent and disorderly' mob and *The Northern Whig* praised the R.I.C. from the nearby Brown Square barrack, without whom 'the disturbance might have been attended with more serious consequences'.¹¹⁶ *The Irish News* demurred, blaming the R.I.C. for the violence, but a subsequent police inquiry found the newspaper's claim baseless.¹¹⁷

Despite the Mayor's arguments to the contrary, the police commissioner Thomas Moriarty did not think the Protestant leaders had 'the smallest influence over the rough element disposed to riot' and made 'ample Police arrangements'¹¹⁸ for what he clearly believed to be a very troublesome centenary celebration day in Belfast. The R.I.C. had been reinforced in the city after 1886 and, due to the extension of the city's boundary in 1895, police numbers were augmented by 100 making a total of

¹¹⁵ *BNL*, 24 May 1898.

¹¹⁶ Report of District Inspector Wright to Commissioner Moriarty, 25 May 1898 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1912/9309) and *NW*, 24 May 1898.

¹¹⁷ *IN*, 24 May 1898 and Report of District Inspector Wright to Commissioner Moriarty, 25 May 1898 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1912/9309).

¹¹⁸ '98 Centenary Demonstration', 31 May 1898 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1912/69163).

920 men. Therefore, in his planning submissions to the Inspector General, Moriarty made plain that as the use of county R.I.C. drafts in the city was anathema, he 'require[d] no extra police', rather 'relying on the military for any extra help'.¹¹⁹ The army promised the use of 400 infantry and a squadron of Dragoons from Victoria Street Barracks, the same number of infantry from Hollywood Barracks. Subject to the Mayor's permission, these would be split into parties of fifty or 100 men, with their own magistrates, and placed in R.I.C. barracks or strategic locations throughout the city.¹²⁰

However, from the outset, the Mayor and an uninterested and partisan magistracy were effectively in opposition to Moriarty. The Mayor believed the R.I.C. were 'making too much of the business entirely' [and] 'objected to bringing out military until rioting actually [Moriarty's emphasis] commenced'.¹²¹ Moriarty pleaded for a change in the route of the procession to lessen the potential strife and after much prevarication the Mayor and Magistrates eventually acquiesced, but only after a thinly veiled threat was issued from Dublin Castle.¹²²

The march began on Monday 6 June at 10.30a.m., departing from Smithfield en route to Hannahstown, where John Dillon, M.P. and other Nationalist luminaries would address the meeting. From 9.30 a.m. onwards sizable and disorderly Protestant crowds attempted to force their way through the police cordons to attack the

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.* and '98 Centenary Demonstration in Belfast', 1 June 1898 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1912/11935).

¹²⁰ '98 Centenary Demonstration', 31 May 1898 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1912/69163).

¹²¹ '98 Centenary Demonstration in Belfast', 1 June 1898 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1912/11935).

¹²² Letter from D. Harrel to Lord Mayor, 1 June 1898 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1912/11935).

assembling processionists. However, 'as every point was so carefully guarded',¹²³ it was not until the march had proceeded as far as Dover and Percy Streets that the cordons were breached. Serious stone throwing between marchers and onlookers ensued for nearly thirty minutes until the police were able to subdue the rioters. Two policemen were injured and three arrests were made. Once the march had reached Grosvenor Road a shot was fired at the procession and the marchers attempted to retaliate by attacking opposing Protestants lower down the road, but they were repelled by mounted and foot police. At Broadway the march came under attack from a hail of stones from nearby streets, but again the police were able to contain the trouble and prevent it from spreading. Once the procession reached Andersonstown an exchange of shots and stones began between marchers and hostile crowds, although this disorder was limited and nothing more serious took place.

The return from Hannahstown in the late afternoon was similarly marred by violence from Protestant demonstrators and processionists alike. One District Inspector, whose meticulous and skilful preparations typified R.I.C. arrangements on the day, described the return of the procession:

The processionists behaved in a disorderly manner when passing Percy Street - shouting defiantly - waving banners - throwing bottles into Percy Street, and firing pistol shots. I went to Ardmoulin Avenue and brought a few of the mounted men towards Percy Street. Suddenly stones were thrown at the cordon of police.

Batons were drawn and the crowd dispersed. They ran into houses, and into side

¹²³ '98 Demonstration in Belfast and subsequent rioting', 7 June 1898 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1912/11935).

streets, and gathering again continued to stone us fiercely. As we cleared one street we were attacked from another. This went on for an hour or so, until the procession had passed, and the rioters withdrew towards Shankill [*sic*] Road.¹²⁴

By about 7 p.m. fierce and sustained rioting had broken out on the Shankill Road which was solely directed towards the police. D.I. Stevenson was requested to provide assistance, and as he and his party entered the Shankill Road, he saw,

a party of police with Sergeant Gibson, being forced down Shankill [*sic*] Road by a dense mob, who were showering stones at them. I rallied this party formed them up with my own party; told them off as well as possible (under a shower of stones). We doubled up the road forcing back the crowd still showering stones - men being constantly struck. I put four men in each side street as we went along to keep parties who ran down these side streets from coming out behind us. At this time cavalry (police) charged up the street clearing crowd [*sic*]. I found we had not sufficient men to cope with the mob, after men had been detached for side streets, and we fell back slowly towards Brown's Square Barracks, frequently turning to check the stone-throwing mob. We remained outside Brown's Square Barracks, until the military arrived. I saw several men struck while we stood

¹²⁴ Private Papers of District Inspector J. V. Stevenson (in the possession of William Stevenson). D. I. Stevenson, who had served with distinction during previous Belfast riots, was highly commended and rewarded for his part in the 1898 riots. When he left Belfast to become Chief Constable of Glasgow, *The Magpie* called him an 'esteemed and capable officer [who] by his invariable courtesy and geniality....gained the high appreciation of all'. *The Magpie*, 12 April 1902, p.100 and Royal Irish Constabulary officers register 1817-1914, vols i-iii: (P.R.O.(L) H.O., 18 4/45-47).

there, I think nearly every[police]man on the road was struck.¹²⁵

Whilst D.I. Stevenson and his men were 'being stoned unmercifully by an immense crowd', he was joined by another officer and his men and together these policemen began 'fighting for their lives for over half an hour....exhausted [with] many wounded'.¹²⁶ Although entreated by local Protestant clergy and others to withdraw from the Shankill, the R.I.C. men stayed, effecting short charges in order to keep the crowd at a distance until the Army joined them.

With military backup the R.I.C. were able to make seventy-five arrests for riotous behaviour and peace was eventually restored to the Shankill at around 1.00 a.m.. Moriarty summed up the rioting in the Shankill thus: 'This was no rioting between rival factions it was an unprovoked savage attack by the Orangemen on the R.I.C. because they did their duty....in successfully protecting the 98 Centenary Demonstration from attack'.¹²⁷ That 'savage attack' cost the police dearly: 103 men were injured and in one incident a mounted policeman, Constable Torrens, was felled by a stone and then beaten so badly with his own baton that he had to be hospitalised. Gerald Balfour, the Chief Secretary, subsequently took a personal interest in the constable's welfare.¹²⁸ *The Times* observed that 'the rioting has not been paralleled since the disturbances of 12 years ago' and even *The Belfast*

¹²⁵ Private Papers of District Inspector J.V. Stevenson (in the possession of William Stevenson).

¹²⁶ '98 Demonstration in Belfast and subsequent rioting', 7 June 1898 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1912/11935).

¹²⁷ 'Rioting on the Shankill Road', 7 June 1898 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1912/11935).

¹²⁸ 'Message from Chief Secretary to Under Secretary', 8 June 1898 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1912/11935).

Newsletter refused to defend the Protestant attacks.¹²⁹

Blame for the riots was swiftly apportioned by David Harrel, the Under Secretary, who in a lengthy letter to the Chief Secretary wrote:

The disturbances of yesterday and last night would appear to have arisen from the Police having been asked to undertake an almost impossible task, namely, with their limited numbers, to establish effective cordons across the streets between the Orange locality and the route of the procession. It is to be regretted that military were not employed for this purpose as suggested from this Office....I submit the following wire....from the Commissioner of Police to show that the fault does not lie at his door....“I did suggest to the Lord Mayor the advisability of blocking certain streets with the military, but he was opposed to that course. I was informed by the Assistant Adjutant General, acting for the General, that the General was also opposed to soldiers doing policemen’s work by blocking streets”....If there be further disturbance tonight, it will in my opinion be absolutely necessary to request the General Commanding at Belfast to co-operate more freely with the Commissioner of Police as regards the use of troops, even although this may be at variance with the opinion of the Lord Mayor.¹³⁰

As a former police officer who had served in Belfast,¹³¹ Harrel probably had a great deal of sympathy for the plight of Moriarty and his men. This first-hand experience may have coloured his judgement, nevertheless, the facts of the riots seemed to have

¹²⁹ *The Times*, 7 June 1898 and *BNL*, 7 June 1898.

¹³⁰ ‘Belfast Riots’, 7 June 1898, (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1912/11935).

¹³¹ Sir David Harrel, *Recollections and Reflections* (1926) (223 page typescript in the possession of the John Rylands Library, Manchester, Tynan Collection), p.39.

borne out his conclusions.

A second spate of rioting began the following evening between the Catholic enclave at Duffy's Place and Protestants in Dover Street. The R.I.C. managed to separate the combatants and were rewarded with an onslaught of stones from the Protestant mob. A contingent of dragoons reinforced the R.I.C. party and sealed off the streets adjoining the Shankill Road. Protestant rioters then looted and destroyed a nearby public house in Percy Street and rushed to attack Catholics in the Falls Road. Fierce stone-throwing ensued; the police charged twice but to no avail. After the Riot Act was read, 'the dragoons charged with the butt end of their lances and cleared the street....[the R.I.C.] charged with them and arrested three prisoners'.¹³² Foot soldiers were then deployed to cordon off the roads between the Shankill and the Falls, but rioting broke out elsewhere in the area, keeping the police 'running about all night'.¹³³

The R.I.C. commander, D.I. John Barniville, a police veteran of thirty-six years, was wounded during the evening, and was clearly shocked by the ferocity and intense hatred displayed by the crowd. He later remarked: 'our men were quite powerless to cope with these stone-throwing mobs with batons only. Whenever we made our appearance we were stoned and struck from a distance'.¹³⁴ *The Times* concurred, and the 'extraordinary animosity shown against the police' was noted by

¹³² 'Royal Irish Constabulary. Report of Outrage', 7 June to 8 June 1898 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1912/C10028).

¹³³ *Ibid.*

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, John Barnivill, a promoted constable, had been rewarded for service in previous disturbances in the city and was to receive similar marks of distinction for 1898, Royal Irish Constabulary officers register 1817-1914, vols i-iii (P.R.O.(L) H.O., 184/45-47).

the Chief Secretary in a speech to Parliament.¹³⁵

Once again David Harrel wrote a caustic letter to his superior lambasting the ‘imperfect arrangements [which left] the Police....overburdened and discouraged’. After reiterating the mistakes of the 6th, he maintained that ‘the policy of the day before was pursued as regards the military. They were not called out until the damage had been done’.¹³⁶ Harrel placed the blame on the Mayor and a General who he believed was not ‘quite conscious of his responsibilities’ and made plain that:

If things continue to go badly, the Inspector General could, so far and as long as possible, act in consort with the Lord Mayor and Local Authorities, but at the same time be invested with full powers to take the necessary steps for the preservation of the peace.¹³⁷

The threat to effectively override the Mayor and Magistracy demonstrated the irritation felt by government about the way the riots were handled, an irritation which Balfour articulated in the very public forum of the House of Commons:

It is not my business, as representing the Executive, to defend in every point the action of the local authorities with whom the arrangements of the details of such cases naturally and necessarily lie. It may be that their action was not in all respects the most prudent, judging by the light of subsequent events.¹³⁸

It was a somewhat understated condemnation, but condemnation nevertheless.

¹³⁵ *The Times*, 8 June 1898 and *Hansard 4*, Volume LVIII, 18 May to 10 June 1898, p.1212, Mr. Balfour.

¹³⁶ Letter from Under Secretary to Chief Secretary, 8 June 1898 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1912/11935).

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ *Hansard 4*, Volume LVIII, 18 May to 10 June 1898, p.1210, Mr. Balfour.

The presence of the Army continued on Belfast's streets for another week, but the worst of the rioting was over by 8 June. In a postscript to the riots, there was a trial of some of the Shankill rioters in July, which resulted in twenty-four convictions, however there were thirty-two acquittals. In a remarkable *volte-face*, *The Belfast Newsletter* maintained that the Protestant crowds were not as violent or as riotous as they were portrayed and that many innocent bystanders were caught up in the police sweep. D.I. Stevenson sagely observed in his private notebook: 'the acquittals show that the juries were not disposed to convict, save where coerced by overwhelming evidence, there were very few passive onlookers. A few rioters could not injure more than 100 police!'.¹³⁹ Although there was a small-scale riot on 31 December 1898 and another on 5 June 1899, the police were never seriously taxed in either and quelled both, the latter riot with the deployment of the Army as a 'preventative measure'.¹⁴⁰ Belfast's Victorian riots were over.

Speaking in general terms, one historian has recently characterised the R.I.C. as being 'neither flexible nor innovative'.¹⁴¹ In the cauldron of the Belfast riots this was often an accurate assessment of the force, particularly in the years leading up to 1886. However, as we have seen, the R.I.C. was capable of adapting to the challenges it faced, and it made efforts to improve its policing of the city's riots and

¹³⁹ *BNL*, 28 July 1898 and the Private Papers of District Inspector J.V. Stevenson (in the possession of William Stevenson).

¹⁴⁰ Crime Branch Special: Inspector General's Monthly Confidential Report for December 1898. County Inspector's Reports annexed (P.R.O.(L), C.O., 904/69), f.581 and 'Disturbances in Belfast, 1912', Report from T.J. Smith, Commissioner to Inspector General Sir Neville Chamberlain, 29 August 1912 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1912/15601).

¹⁴¹ M. O' Callaghan, *British High Politics and a Nationalist Ireland: Criminality, Land and the Law under Forster and Balfour* (Cork, 1994), p.19.

was certainly genuinely innovative during the 1893 disturbances.¹⁴² But, the Belfast R.I.C. was often hamstrung in their efforts by the tardy or reluctant use of the military, which were the only viable reserve after 1886, because military deployment technically lay in the hands of the local authorities, who, were variously downright obstructive, indifferent or hostile to the R.I.C. Part of this difficulty was structural because as David Harrel observed: 'The position of the Commissioner of Police [was] not sufficiently influential to enable him to represent and carry out the views of Government'.¹⁴³ This was true throughout the period. Part of the problem was also the military's reluctance to get involved in doing work which it regarded as 'impolitic....injurious to recruiting and interfering in civil strife'.¹⁴⁴ There are many documented cases of the Army's reluctance to aid the police.

Sometimes the R.I.C. failed simply because of the 'helplessness of the ordinary Irish official in the face of an emergency', which although an unnecessarily anti-Irish comment from Arthur Balfour in the wake of the Mitchelstown R.I.C. shootings, nevertheless held a grain of truth for a rigidly disciplined force where '[e]very possibility of an officer acting upon his own responsibility seemed to have been carefully guarded against'.¹⁴⁵ Yet at other times of course officers showed

¹⁴² 'Memorandum showing in what respects the recommendations in the Report of the Commission on the Belfast Riots of 1886 have been carried out', n.d., (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1912/15601/11935).

¹⁴³ Letter from Under Secretary to Chief Secretary, 8 June 1898 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1912/11935).

¹⁴⁴ 'Disturbances in Belfast, 1912', Letter from C.W. Leatham, Late Commissioner of Police, Belfast to Neville Chamberlain, 16 August 1912 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1912/15601).

¹⁴⁵ Balfour to Lord Salisbury, 21 September 1887, quoted in L.P. Curtis, Jr., *Coercion and conciliation in Ireland 1880-1892. A Study in Conservative Unionism*

extraordinary skill and initiative - 1898 being a good example.

Possibly the biggest difficulty the R.I.C. had to face during Belfast's riots was that it was required to operate in precisely the areas where animosity to the force ran deepest. Although, probably the most popular of forces would not have controlled Belfast's working-classes because, as one local journal remarked: 'Belfast...was a place where they opened a meeting with the doxology and closed it with a free fight'!¹⁴⁶ A further impediment to successful crowd control was insufficiency of numbers and, although the city force was reinforced after the 1886 riots, its establishment was always inadequate. If the Treasury had provided funds for a larger police establishment, the R.I.C. may well have been able to cope with disturbances before they became widespread. Substantial numbers of police familiar with both the terrain and the people could have operated swiftly and without the need for extensive military support.

The R.I.C. did not experience stunning success or abject failure in its policing of Belfast's riots - its record was simply a variable one. On many occasions its failures were not of its own making, on others palpably so, but even if it had been consistently well officered, well paid with high morale and ably supported by the City Council and the army, it is still doubtful if it could it have coped with Belfast's fractured community. The riots were the result of bitter sectarian animosities and no

(Princeton, 1963), p.199 and C.D.C. Lloyd, *Ireland under the Land League. A Narrative of Personal Experiences* (London, 1892), p.56.

¹⁴⁶ *The Magpie*, Number 41, Volume III, 17 June 1899,p.170.

amount of good policing was likely to prevent them. If the R.I.C. did fail to a degree in Belfast, it was a matter of failing to do the impossible.

CHAPTER V

CLOSELY AKIN TO ACTUAL WARFARE

The journalist Frankfort Moore, writing in 1914 about events he witnessed in the late nineteenth century, described his experience of watching Protestant “loyalists” in Portadown attacking the R.I.C. It was he remarked:

The proper way to conduct a street riot, [however, if Portadown was where], every boy and girl in the crowd understood the art [of the street riot] thoroughly.... none of the principals in these actions knew anything of strategy, compared with those who engineered the sacking of York Street upon that dark night in August, 1886.¹

That night was one of many riotous nights in Belfast during the summer and autumn of 1886; riots which Frankfort Moore’s first-hand observations led him to believe were ‘closely akin to actual warfare’.² One historian later claimed the riots ‘were so serious as to assume the character of civil war’.³

Notwithstanding what may be a touch of hyperbole, the riots were costly in human and financial terms: thirty-two people died, hundreds of people were injured and some £90,000 worth of damage was caused. Given their self-evident importance, it is perhaps surprising that no serious academic study has been undertaken of the riots. Four historians of Belfast, Jonathan Bardon, W.A. Maguire, C. Hirst and J.C.

¹ F. F. Moore, *The Truth about Ulster* (London, 1914), pp.45, 62.

² *Ibid.*, p.62.

³ A.T.Q. Stewart, *The Narrow Ground: Aspects of Ulster, 1609-1969* (London, 1977), p.141.

Beckett,⁴ mention the riots; similarly A.C. Hepburn's examination of the history of Catholic Belfast⁵ deals with aspects of the riots. However, only two works attempt any lengthy analysis of these events. The first, Andrew Boyd's *Holy War in Belfast*,⁶ is a vivid evocation of Belfast's sectarian riots, but the lack of footnotes makes it less of an academic study than the second work, Ian Budge and Cornelius O'Leary's *Belfast: Approach to Crisis*,⁷ which, whilst using more primary source material nevertheless in adhering closely to its broad time frame and essentially political remit, can only hope to cover fleetingly some of the issues involved. Therefore the most comprehensive and reliable account of the riots remains the government's own enquiry, the huge *Report of the Belfast Riots Commissioners* produced in 1887.⁸

The *casus belli* for the terrible riots of 1886 was a relatively minor quarrel, which took place on 3 June between a Protestant worker, called Blakely, and a Catholic father and son, called Murphy, who were working at the Alexandra Dock. One of the Murphys struck Blakely saying 'that neither he [Blakely] nor any of his sort should get leave to work there, or earn a loaf there or any place'.⁹ An almost innocuous incident perhaps, but set against the background of the introduction of the

⁴ J. Bardon, *Belfast: An Illustrated History* (Belfast, 1982), W.A. Maguire, *Belfast* (Keele, 1993), C. Hirst, *Religion, Politics and Violence in 19th Century Belfast: the Pound and Sandy Row* (Dublin, 2001) and J.C. Beckett et al, *Belfast: The Making of a City* (Belfast, 1983).

⁵ A.C. Hepburn, *A Past Apart. Studies in the History of Catholic Belfast 1850-1950* (Belfast, 1996).

⁶ A. Boyd, *Holy War in Belfast* (Tralee, 1969), pp.119-73.

⁷ I. Budge and C. O'Leary, *Belfast: Approach to Crisis. A Study of Belfast Politics 1613-1970* (London, 1973), pp.73-100.

⁸ *Belfast Riots Commission 1886, Report of the Belfast Riots Commissioners, Minutes of Evidence and Appendix* [C. 4925], H.C. 1887. xviii, 1.

⁹ *Report of the Belfast Riots Commissioners*, p.5.

contentious Home Rule Bill in Parliament and all the political tension this had engendered throughout Ireland, and especially in Belfast, it was a sufficient spark to kindle the flames of sectarian animosity. On 4 June a large group of Protestant riveters from the Queen's Island works attacked the mainly Catholic navvies at the Alexandra Dock. One Catholic boy drowned whilst trying to flee via the River Lagan and ten more Catholics were injured. The riots which followed occurred in three distinct phases: the first lasting from 4 June until 10 June; the second from 12 July until 14 July; and the final phase from 31 July until 21 September. The intervening periods between each phase were generally quiet with just the odd occurrence of minor rioting.

Within the three phases of the riots are several incidents particularly germane to this chapter. The first occurred on the evening of 7 June when a Protestant mob attacked a Catholic-owned public house in Protestant Percy Street. The police intervened in an attempt to save the public house from ruin and were savagely stoned by the intending wreckers. Two policemen received very serious injuries and several other constables sustained less serious injuries. Two further attacks on the police took place that night, both initiated by Shankill Road Protestants and both of a serious nature. 'In a word [as the Riot Commissioners concluded], all through the night of the 7th June there was a very determined spirit of hostility shown by the Shankill-road mob to the police'.¹⁰

The events of 7 June were at variance with subsequent assertions by Belfast's Protestants that their animus towards the R.I.C. was a result of the importation of

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.6.

Catholic country policemen to impose Home Rule by rifle-fire. No Catholic country policeman had yet arrived and the force involved that evening were local R.I.C. men, none of whom fired a shot.¹¹ That evening was also significant in another way. The wrecking and subsequent looting of Catholic-owned pubs in Protestant areas was a marked feature of the riots and in all twenty-eight¹² such premises were sacked, destroying perhaps the last vestiges of Catholic 'occupation' in Protestant territory.

Following the events of 7 June 400 police reinforcements arrived in fifty-man sections, drawn from Donegal, Derry, Cavan, Westmeath, Meath, Louth, Tyrone and Monaghan, with the majority of these men being employed in riot control duties. Approximately one-sixth of each section of county policemen were Belfast town policemen in order to provide local knowledge, and about one-third of the total number of men were equipped with batons, the remaining constables being armed with rifles and sword bayonets.¹³

The equipping of the constables on detached duty with rifles was neither new nor strange. It was established police practice, but two things were different in 1886 compared to previous Belfast riots: firstly, there was a higher proportion of riflemen than the regulation fifty-fifty mix of baton men and riflemen and, secondly, rifles

¹¹ In any event as the Commissioners remarked, 'the ordinary town force.... was mainly officered by Protestants, and out of a total strength of 598 men, there were in it 330 Protestants and 269 Catholics'. *Report of the Belfast Riots Commissioners*, p.6.

¹² *Ibid.*, p.11. Three Protestant public houses were also destroyed.

¹³ *Report by One of the Commissioners of Inquiry, 1886, respecting the Origin and Circumstances of the Riots in Belfast, in June, July, August, and September, 1886, and the action taken thereon by the authorities: Also in regard to the magisterial and police jurisdiction, arrangements, and establishment for the borough of Belfast.* [3029], H.C. and H.L. 1887, p.12.

were used to deadly effect. ¹⁴ Of the thirty-two deaths during the riots, about twenty-four were the result of police rifle-fire - more than in any other riot in Belfast during the nineteenth century or probably any other incident in all of Ireland.

Nineteenth century police forces, like the R.I.C., could only physically challenge rioters with batons, rifle butts, muzzles, bayonets or swords. In March 1880 the government ordered the bulk manufacture of buckshot rounds for issue to the R.I.C. This was intended as a humane innovation designed to achieve a more flexible physical response. The issue of this ammunition to the R.I.C. earned the Chief Secretary W.E. Forster the nickname "Buckshot", but it had more important side effects. The use of buckshot in the rifled short-barrelled police carbine wore the rifling and increased inaccuracy when ball rounds were subsequently used. As a result even the best-trained policeman could not always hit what he aimed at. In the hands of inadequately trained policemen, some of whom may have 'never before shouldered a rifle except for drill purposes', ¹⁵ the results could be - and as it transpired in 1886 were - devastating. Granted the results of buckshot fire were less serious than if the police had only used ball ammunition, but the 28-grain R.I.C. buckshot pellet was heavier than its sporting equivalent and with fifteen pellets per cartridge and a lethal range of fifty yards, it proved almost as deadly in the close confines of a Belfast street.

This use of firearms was not exclusive to the R.I.C. for there were many

¹⁴ *Belfast Riots Commission 1886, Minutes of Evidence*, p.248.

¹⁵ *Report by One of the Commissioners of Inquiry, 1886*, p.16. The implication in the Commissioners' remarks on p.36 would indicate he did not consider police fire was normally accurate.

occasions when the 1886 rioters opened fire with revolvers and rifles, but it was the infamous Belfast “kidney pavers” which most often wrought havoc among the R.I.C. These kidney-shaped paving stones were prised from the streets by women and children and passed to their menfolk who generally threw them with accuracy, despite their average two-pound weight. Iron rivets, screws and nuts filched from the shipyards, supplied further ammunition and were propelled in many cases by catapults. This “Belfast confetti” and its heavier counterpart, the “kidney paver”, accounted for the larger portion of the 371 injuries suffered by the R.I.C. during the riots.¹⁶

The disabling power of these fearsome missiles had at an early stage two important victims: Town Inspector Carr and District Inspector Stritch. Carr was the chief operational officer in Belfast, a seasoned veteran of thirty-six years’ service, resident in Belfast since 1885, and a policeman who had experienced Belfast riots at first hand in 1864 and 1872. Stritch was in charge of the vital West Belfast police district and had policed Belfast since 1882.¹⁷ The temporary but lengthy incapacity of these two pivotal policemen so early in the course of the riots entailed a ‘serious loss of directing power sustained by the Belfast Police Force’,¹⁸ and must have impeded operational efficiency. Similarly, the disablement of another senior officer, District Inspector Townsend, and of the Resident Magistrate Colonel Forbes, both

¹⁶ *Hansard 3*, Volume CCCVIII, 5 August to 9 September 1886, p.882, Sir Michael Hicks Beach and *Belfast Riots Commission 1886, Appendix B*, pp.569-75.

¹⁷ *List of Officers who have served in Belfast for the past 20 years, Belfast Police Commission, 1906* (N.A.I., S.P.O., Misc. and Official Papers, 1876-1922, Parcel 6).

¹⁸ *Report by One of the Commissioners of Inquiry*, p.17 and *Report of the Belfast Riots Commissioners*, p.11.

intimate with Belfast and its problems, during the second phase, may well have had the same net result.

These particular officers aside, generally the R.I.C. man was probably less well prepared for the riots in 1886 than his Irish Constabulary predecessor serving in Belfast in the first half of the nineteenth century. The reasons for this are threefold. Ignoring potential or actual disturbances, the vast majority of policing after 1870 did not entail either the use or carrying of firearms.¹⁹ The R.I.C.'s duties became progressively civil and administrative and to perform these duties a measure of public acceptance and co-operation was required. The duties also put the police at the heart of their communities where their position often engendered respect and good will - an advantageous position for the constabulary and one they were anxious to preserve. This was more relevant in the context of rural communities and less so in the more hostile environment of Belfast, nevertheless, these factors combined in the 'second half of the nineteenth century [to] substantially transform and domesticate the force's character'.²⁰

Constables on detached duty in Belfast would have been products of this "domestication" and, with retirements and even their reduced levels of transfers, the local Belfast force would have been similarly imbued with this ethos. The R.I.C.'s strict disciplinary code, with its military origins, was changing too and this process of gradually softening the rules of discipline, which began in earnest under the

¹⁹ B. Griffin, 'The Irish Police, 1836-1914: A Social History' (unpublished PhD. dissertation, Loyola University of Chicago, 1990), pp.51-2.

²⁰ W.J. Lowe and E.L. Malcolm, 'The Domestication of the Royal Irish Constabulary, 1836-1922', *Irish Economic Social History*, xix (1992), p.30.

regime of Inspector General Bruce (1882-5), gathered pace under the leadership of his successor Andrew Reed (1885-1900). Reed was the only Inspector General to have risen through the ranks of the force who had not served as a military officer and his 'attitude to discipline was much more appropriate to civil policing and was another factor moving the R.I.C. away from its paramilitary origins'.²¹

In purely practical terms this had clear implications for the Constabulary's proficiency in firearms. Weapons training in the latter years of the nineteenth century was perfunctory to say the least, with just twenty practice rounds being the annual musketry requirement and even this was often either indifferently executed or the results falsified.²² In 1899 of the total of 180,000 practice rounds fired only 110,000 hit the target. This poor standard of marksmanship was to have dire consequences in 1886 and matters did not improve after 1900 either, because by 1907 the editor of *The Constabulary Gazette* saw fit to remark that, 'the Constabulary are inefficient as marksmen'²³ - a sobering admission indeed.

On 8 June 1886 the House of Commons threw out the Home Rule Bill. Belfast's Protestant's were overjoyed, immediately beginning to celebrate the bill's defeat. As the celebrations continued into the night, sections of the crowd that had assembled on the Shankill began rioting, some paying further attention to wrecking and looting the public house they had attacked the night before. As a consequence of defending the pub against the mob's depredations, the R.I.C. opened fire in an attempt to both check the mob and protect themselves. Apparently mistaking their officer's

²¹ Lowe and Malcolm, 'The Domestication of the Royal Irish Constabulary', p.42.

²² Griffin, 'The Irish Police', pp.505-6.

²³ [William Harding], *The R.I.C. A Plea for Reform* (Dublin, 1907), p.24.

command, nine men fired in succession instead of the three ordered, but the number of rounds discharged was low and there were no injuries. The police were thus able to extricate themselves from a perilous situation. This was the first firing by the R.I.C. and the description by the officer in charge, Town Inspector Carr, of the action where, 'almost every policeman.... was struck with stones'²⁴ showed resolution under fierce provocation.

Later that day a similar force of R.I.C., endeavouring to prevent the looting and wrecking of another pub, came under an intense attack from a stone-throwing crowd and during that engagement a town policeman fired some rounds of buckshot without permission. Despite the R.I.C.'s erratic performance, the press was generally supportive. The Protestant *Belfast Newsletter* praised the courage of Carr and condoned not only the necessity of police retaliation but also the measures taken to draft in extra policemen. The Catholic *Freeman's Journal* was no less supportive, maintaining that 'the police were obliged to fire on the people'.²⁵ The Riots Commissioners in their reports shared this favourable consensus, but it was a consensus that was to be short lived, as the events of the 9 June were to prove.

During the latter part of Wednesday afternoon, District Inspector William Grene, whose Northern District command included the strategic Shankill Road (Bowershill) Barracks, anticipating a further night of rioting, decided to brief the police allocated to his area. The withdrawal of the 210-strong R.I.C. force from the Shankill to the Donegall Street Barracks for briefing effectively denuded the Shankill Road of

²⁴ *Report of the Belfast Riots Commissioners*, p.7. T.I. Carr was seriously injured in this engagement and took no further part in the first phase of the riots.

²⁵ *BNL*, 9 June 1886 and *FJ*, 9 June 1886 respectively.

police protection and, doubtless aware of this, rioters began attacking the police barracks, which now only contained three policemen, and O'Hare's public house opposite. A series of running skirmishes began as hurriedly recalled police reinforcements arrived from Donegall Street to protect the besieged police barracks and the public house. However, the bulk of the policemen thus despatched were countrymen, and their commanders, District Inspector Mulliner and Head Constable Markham, were both strangers to Belfast. As one R.I.C. detachment under Markham attempted to clear the street from O'Hare's down to North Howard Street, some 1,300 foundry men from the Coombe and Barbour works, having finished work, left the foundry gates, spilling onto North Howard Street. As was their wont the workforce divided into denominational groups and the 800-strong Protestant workers, proceeding in a compact body, ran towards the Shankill Road. The evidence of what transpired is somewhat contradictory but the immediate reaction of the rural policemen, perhaps believing the foundry men were a hostile crowd, was to charge and attempt to disperse them using their batons freely.

The police baton attack was fierce and a number of workers were badly injured. Whether this action constituted what the Mayor, Sir Edward Harland, later characterised as one of the 'two or three....breaches of discipline' committed by the country police or whether it was an action caused by a want of local knowledge, it seemed clear, as one of the commissioners pointed out, [that] 'this occurrence.... greatly increased the excitement then prevailing, and intensified the prejudice so

widely and unreasonably entertained against the county police'.²⁶

Angered by (false) rumours that one of their number had been killed in the Coombe and Barbour fracas, the foundry men swelled the ranks of the rioters²⁷ and intermittent, but severe, running battles occurred over the next few hours. The R.I.C., struggling to cope, made two major forays and several minor ones followed by orderly withdrawals to the besieged barracks. By 8.15 p.m. the crowd had grown to some 5,000-5,500 and the R.I.C., unable to master them without reinforcements, began a third withdrawal to the Bowershill barracks. During the course of this withdrawal the R.I.C. men, having endured the violence and stone throwing of the crowd with a remarkable passivity,²⁸ were at the end of their tether and appealed to D.I. Grene to open fire. Grene refused, but as they reached the barracks, which was in actuality merely an ordinary house, the men, desperate to escape the rioters' stones, became jammed in the narrow doorway. The crowd seeing the policemen's predicament redoubled their efforts and the policemen, finding their entry to the barracks blocked and having, they perceived, no other choice but to defend themselves, turned and, without orders, fired. Amidst the clatter of stones and confusion, the shots appeared to those R.I.C. men, both within and without of the barracks, to have been under orders and they too commenced firing. Once D.I. Grene

²⁶ *Belfast Riots Commission 1886, Minutes of Evidence, p.272 and Report by One of the Commissioners of Inquiry, p.18.*

²⁷ After rioting had ceased several hundred items of "Belfast Confetti" were found lying in the street, suggesting that the foundry men may have been bent on mischief and had possibly provoked the attack made on them. See, Boyd, *Holy War*, p.129

²⁸ Both Assistant Inspector General F.N. Cullen and the minority Commissioner remarked upon the passivity of the country police in adversity. See *Belfast Riots Commission, 1886, Minutes of Evidence, p.46 and p.79 and Report by One of the Commissioners of Inquiry, p.21.*

and the others effected an entrance to the barracks, the D.I. and a small number of men fired from the upstairs window to prevent those rioters, who they believed, were going to sack the barracks, from forcing entry.²⁹

Eventually reinforcements were notified by runners, the severity of the rioters' bombardment having destroyed the telegraphic equipment. However, a detachment of the Highland Light Infantry together with a reserve of policemen took an hour to fight their way to Bowershill, such was the ferocity of the crowds. The arrival of the military ended what became known as the "Battle of Bowershill", and the besieging mobs dispersed from the Shankill which, to one newspaper, 'presented the appearance of a bombarded town'.³⁰

The R.I.C. had killed seven people, five of whom, 'were wholly innocent (either by act or intention) of the slightest offence against the law' and seriously injured, by either batons or rifles, a further twenty-six.³¹ Although the County Westmeath policemen were the first to fire, the majority of the shots fired were actually by the Belfast town force who expended eighty-nine ball and thirty-nine buckshot rounds, compared to the various country policemen who in total fired thirty-nine ball rounds and twenty-six buckshot.³² *The Times* described the police action at Coombe and Barbour's as being, 'without provocation [and subsequent firing as] a regular

²⁹'Report of Riots 1886' by A.I.G. F.N. Cullen, 15 June 1886 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1886/19230, 1663/5869) and *Belfast Riots Commission 1886, Minutes of Evidence*, p.80.

³⁰*The Times*, 11 June 1886.

³¹*Report by One of the Commissioners of Inquiry*, p.25.

³²*Ibid. Supplement B1.*

fusillade upon those in possession of the streets'.³³

Local newspapers were more muted but they expressed in journalistic argot the simple truth, "that someone had blundered". Tennysonian allusions aside, the R.I.C.'s actions on this day not only aroused the ire of all sections of the Protestant population but also provoked a flurry of concern at Westminster. Whilst the local Protestant reaction and that of M.P.s like E.S.W. De Cobain were largely predictable, and, although, the Riots Commissioners later generally exculpated the R.I.C.,³⁴ it was, nevertheless, a horrendous twenty-four hours for the police and one which set the tone for almost all of the subsequent clashes between the R.I.C. and the residents of the Shankill during 1886.

What served to heighten tension still further were the inquests which were to assume a familiar pattern, and a private letter from one of the Resident Magistrates to Dublin Castle is particularly revealing in this context:

the action of the Coroner who rightly or wrongly has been considered as being hostile to the Constabulary is open to objection, for instead of holding one or two inquests when all the facts could be brought out he has prolonged the excitement by nearly taking an inquest on each day and the jurors, nearly in all cases are Protestants, which in this town is equivalent to being Orangemen. So that with a hostile Coroner and the majority of jurors sympathetic with the rioters it was not

³³*The Times*, 10 June 1886.

³⁴*BNL*, 11, 12, and 14 June 1886 and *FJ*, 12 June 1886, provide a flavour of Protestant reaction.

Hansard 3, Volume CCCVI 25 May to 19 June 1886, p.1482-83, Mr E.S.W. De Cobain. E. De Cobain was an Independent Conservative and prominent Orangeman who represented the Belfast East constituency until 1891. For Commissioners' remarks see, *Report of the Belfast Riot Commissioners*, p.9.

anticipated any of their verdicts would be neutral.³⁵

So it was to prove - a fact not ameliorated by the initial reluctance of the R.I.C. to either offer assistance or evidence to the Borough Coroner, Dr Dill.³⁶

When police evidence regarding the Bowershill shooting was offered in the form of D.I. Grene's testimony, it merely fanned the flames of Protestant discontent and *The Belfast Newsletter's* coverage of the inquests grew increasingly hostile, culminating in a savage editorial on 16 June. Privately, the authorities were concerned both about the wisdom of what was felt was D.I. Grene's alacrity to testify and about the discipline of the R.I.C., who it was believed, 'got completely out of hand'.³⁷ Publicly, however, the Home Secretary, maintained, when questioned in Parliament, that they had,

no information of a reliable character.... of any misconduct on the part of any member of the county constabulary now serving in Belfast [concluding that] the government have the fullest confidence in the Royal Irish Constabulary.³⁸

Notwithstanding the government's support - probably vital given the gravity of the situation - the R.I.C. became increasingly isolated as the coroner's verdicts of manslaughter and wilful murder against the police rolled in. The invective used against the country police in particular by the town's main Protestant organ *The*

³⁵Correspondence from J.S. McLeod R.M. to Sir Robert Hamilton, 19 June 1886 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1886/19230).

³⁶*BNL*, 12, 14 and 15 June 1886.

³⁷ Correspondence from J.S. McLeod R.M. to Sir Robert Hamilton 12 and 19 June 1886 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1886/19230). This is implicit in Andrew Reed's evidence to the Riots Commissioners when he remarked that: 'In the beginning of the riots, when their [the police] conduct, it might be said required investigation', *Belfast Riots Commission 1886, Minutes of Evidence*, p.222.

³⁸*Hansard* 3, Volume CCCVI, 25 May to 19 June 1886, p.1483, Mr. Childers.

Belfast Newsletter could only have further weakened the police's ability to perform effectively.³⁹ An early constabulary inquiry into the Bowershill shootings might have helped to "soothe troubled breasts" and there is evidence that it was considered by Andrew Reed, but it was eventually dropped because of the government Inquiry Commission mooted to begin on 26 July.⁴⁰ However, it is doubtful if a police investigation would have had much impact considering the entrenched views of almost all sections of the Protestant community.

Although rioting continued after Bowershill, the passions of the crowd did not reach the ferocity of 9 June and, after the funerals of the victims, the situation quietened with the R.I.C. beginning a phased withdrawal of its reinforcements on 14 June, which was completed by 22 June. At the height of the first phase of the riots some 1,600 R.I.C. men had been deployed in Belfast from the force's total strength of 12,860 and, despite the support of infantry and cavalry, the R.I.C. had not covered itself in glory. However, its reputation in general and that of the county detachments in particular could not have been helped by either the hostile press or by a decision on 10 June of the Mayor and borough magistracy: 'that the county constabulary should not be used in the disturbed districts unless it should become absolutely necessary'.⁴¹ The suggestion that this decision was a capitulation to the demands of a Protestant deputation from the Shankill Road must have further embarrassed the

³⁹*BNL*, 14 June 1886. Although less strident in its remarks, *The Times* also showed itself to be less than sympathetic to the country police reinforcements; the 12 and 14 June reports provide good examples.

⁴⁰*Belfast Riots Commission 1886, Minutes of Evidence*, p.222.

⁴¹*Report by One of the Commissioners of Inquiry*, p.26.

constabulary and surely dented the men's morale.⁴²

The policing of the next phase of the riots had its familiar aspects, with the R.I.C. planning to cope with the party excitement caused by the 6 July General Election, following the defeat of Gladstone's Home Rule Bill, and the perennial difficulty of the 12 July Orange demonstrations. In the event no significant rioting attended either occasion despite a Catholic Home Rule candidate, Thomas Sexton, winning in West Belfast.

The real trouble began mid-afternoon on 13 July when a band marching to the opening ceremony of an Orange Hall at Ballynafeigh came under sustained attack from a Catholic mob. Serious rioting ensued which spread to a number of Belfast's districts. When "battle" commenced at the Brickfields that evening police attempts to separate the protagonists were met with revolver and rifle fire from Protestant rioters and, although R.I.C. casualties from these early exchanges were light, a head constable and a private of the West Surrey Regiment were later killed. The police response during this day of rioting was to try and force the rioters apart and turn them back to their own areas. But their attempts to do so were met with considerable resistance and the police were ultimately unable to cope without the aid of 400 soldiers. At the height of the conflict one police detachment, under District Inspector McClelland of King's County, surrounded, heavily stoned and in danger of being swamped, fired one shot to try and disperse the mob. When this failed they opened fire severally and as a result two rioters subsequently died. This, like other police fire on the 13th, was disciplined considering the circumstances - a fact made clear in the

⁴²FJ, 11 June 1886.

Riot Commissioners' subsequent reports.⁴³

Whilst the evidence demonstrates that the police response during this phase was disciplined, *The Belfast Newsletter* was concerned to show the R.I.C.'s behaviour was partial. The newspaper attempted balance in its first reports on 14 July, but abandoned objectivity the following day stating that,

when the police found it necessary to interfere.... the Falls Road party had already wrecked the houses of....the Shankhill party, and [as] the latter turned out to defend themselves, if not to retaliate.... they were charged and beaten, and it is alleged the aggressors were allowed to beat a retreat scot-free.⁴⁴

The Freeman's Journal on 15 July made similar if contrary claims in its coverage of the riots, alleging that the authorities were allowing Protestant rioters *carte blanche* to wreck Catholic houses. However, blame for this was focussed on 'the incompetency of the authorities' rather than the R.I.C. *per se* and when it complained about 'a policeman's helmet [not] even being in view', the paper made clear it was due to the 'bond of sympathy, [which] exists between the rioters and the unpaid magistrates.... and some resident magistrates who command the civil and military troops'.⁴⁵

Allegations of R.I.C. partiality continued throughout the riots and were mainly propagated by *The Belfast Newsletter*. Whilst initially reserving its more bilious comments for the country police reinforcements, it quickly included the town force

⁴³*Report by One of the Commissioners of Inquiry*, pp. 32-3 and *Report of the Belfast Riots Commissioners*, p.10.

⁴⁴*BNL*, 15 July 1886.

⁴⁵*FJ*, 15 July 1886.

as well. *The Freeman's Journal* was more restrained in its allegations of partiality, but when Catholic rioters were shot by the R.I.C. in the latter stages of the riots, the newspaper adopted a more condemnatory tone.⁴⁶ The Inquiry Commissioners questioned witnesses carefully on the issue of R.I.C. partiality and concluded that the accusations were 'without a shadow of foundation [and that] the police acted towards both sides with the strictest impartiality'.⁴⁷ However, the Commission did gloss over the documented behaviour of one policeman, Head Constable Robert McFarland. On 6 August, following an incident during which policemen opened fire on Protestant rioters at the Mullhouse Factory, McFarland assisted two Protestant civilians to gain the names of the policemen who had fired. This unorthodox act was quite probably contrary to police regulations, in spirit if not in substance, and certainly a demonstration of partiality. McFarland, an adherent of the anti-R.I.C. cleric, Hugh Hanna, admitted in his evidence to the Commission that he had contributed to the Irish Loyal and Patriotic Union Report, a diatribe bitterly critical of the R.I.C. He also confessed to being the policeman that the Loyalist Defence Association most wanted to control the police on the Shankill Road. These and other admissions led the President of the Commission to express his contempt for McFarland's stance, but the Commission itself stopped short of accusing him of partiality.⁴⁸

⁴⁶For a sample of the *Newsletter's* comments, see *BNL*, 3, 5, 7 and 8 August 1886, for the *Freeman's*, see *FJ*, 20 September 1886.

⁴⁷*Report of the Belfast Riots Commissioners*, p.20.

⁴⁸*Belfast Riots Commission 1886, Minutes of Evidence*, pp. 482-88 and *Report of the Belfast Riots Commissioners*, p.13. For further details on McFarland see, Boyd, *Holy War*, pp. 159-60.

Aside from the newspaper allegations of the R.I.C.'s partiality and those aired within the Commission's minutes of evidence, there remained the above mentioned Irish Loyal and Patriotic Union Report sponsored by its executive committee and prepared by Barrister Arthur Patton and Surgeon George Foy. The report was split into two sections. The first, by Patton, was a sequential account of the riots, which employed unsubstantiated and anonymous stories to highlight Catholic and police responsibility for the initiation and continuation of the riots. The second section by Foy was ostensibly designed as a neutral medical examination of the wounds sustained by the rioters. Despite this veneer of medical neutrality, in concentrating on those wounds most likely to have been inflicted by the police, Foy betrayed a political subtext that seems to have been entirely consistent with the report's sponsors. *The Times*, which hitherto had not been a particular friend of the constabulary, printed both reports in full commenting on Patton's contribution thus: 'the evidence which he states on both sides of the case does not quite bear out his summing up'.⁴⁹

However, this understated response by *The Times* seems to posit the notion that perhaps there was evidence of R.I.C. partiality, a crucial notion given that the R.I.C.'s partiality could have been the cause of the continuation of the riots or it may have created the conditions for the trial of strength between the R.I.C. and the rioters. Certainly there is a deluge of accusations in the reports, but by the time the Riots Commission was appointed these accusations either seemed to melt away

⁴⁹*The Times*, 30 August, 1886. Patton and Foy's reports can be found respectively, in the 28 and 30 August issues of the newspaper.

before the Inquiry commenced or failed to stand up to the rigours of questioning. That is not to say that there were no other cases of R.I.C. partiality. One constable named Traynor 'boasted that he had shot a number of Protestants' and was subsequently dismissed from the force. Reed admitted to the Commissioners that there were 'several reports' from his Assistant Inspector General 'as to the conduct of other officers of the force'.⁵⁰ Later in his evidence, after confessing to 'a great many cases' of R.I.C. indiscipline, Reed retracted the remark and said 'that there were not a great many'.⁵¹ This attempt by Reed to minimise R.I.C. misbehaviour was perhaps understandable given his position, but such loyalty to the force was later to lead to tension between Reed and the Chief Secretary, A. J. Balfour, who believed that Reed 'kept the worst cases of insubordination secret'.⁵² It cannot be surprising that there were at least some cases of partiality, the R.I.C. were after all in many cases products of communities where issues of Unionism or Nationalism were at the forefront of local life - no uniform could insulate a man against those realities.

When one considers the R.I.C. reinforcements it is quite possible that Westmeath District Inspector Mulliner's comments held for all his detached colleagues: 'I did not know what the mob were or who they were. I don't see how my men could have known them either. My men were never there before'.⁵³ These remarks form a vein throughout the Commission Inquiry with flat denials of partiality emanating from all those policemen questioned. Undoubtedly R.I.C. detachments had little or no time to

⁵⁰*Belfast Riots Commission 1886, Minutes of Evidence*, p.253.

⁵¹*Belfast Riots Commission 1886, Minutes of Evidence*, p.254.

⁵²L.P. Curtis, Jr., *Coercion and Conciliation in Ireland. A Study in Conservative Unionism* (Princeton, 1963), p. 196.

⁵³*Belfast Riots Commission 1886, Minutes of Evidence*, p.81.

acclimatise themselves to the conditions of Belfast because, as Town Inspector Carr admitted, 'the men were taken from the train straight and marched on to the streets, and kept there in some cases twenty-four hours without being relieved'.⁵⁴

Clearly briefing was not a priority either, as one sergeant on detached duty confirmed: 'He had no instructions when he came into Belfast from anyone'.⁵⁵ Notwithstanding the foregoing, there may have been some disingenuousness in these men's statements given the leavening of Belfast town men that each detachment received. Nevertheless, hard evidence for the R.I.C. acting out of partiality during the 1886 riots is simply not extant. But public perception is all and Protestants in Belfast obviously viewed the R.I.C. as a sectarian force during the 1886 riots and as a result subjected the R.I.C. to a level of sectarian abuse that was unequalled in Belfast during the nineteenth century. At the heart of this perception was the deployment on Belfast's streets of R.I.C. country detachments from the South of Ireland, an issue which was brought to a head at the beginning of the final phase of the riots.

There had been calls to withdraw the country police almost from the moment of their deployment, but these calls became those of a clarion once the M.P. Edward DeCobain publicly denounced the rural policemen in a letter to *The Belfast Evening Telegraph*. His letter, written on 4 August and published two days later, condemned the country reinforcements as blood-thirsty killers of Orangemen and advised Protestants: 'To form themselves into detective detachments to gather information

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p.548.

⁵⁵ *BNL*, 19 August 1886.

and to bring home guilt to the liveried assassins'.⁵⁶ This letter was followed by a vitriolic pamphlet, thoroughly opposed to the constabulary, and distributed on 16 August, which characterised the R.I.C. country policemen as 'raw clumsy, ill-walked, sour policemen [who] after a heavy night's work go and lie down, like so many of the lower animals on a bed of straw'.⁵⁷ The pamphlet dripped anti-Catholic sectarian invective which, whilst being anti-R.I.C. to the core, had as its principal target 'the strange [or] imported police'.⁵⁸

Such outpourings of hate added to the hostility already prevailing amongst Belfast's Protestants, but Cobain's patronage and the remarks by men like Lord De Ros in parliament⁵⁹ gave an almost respectable veneer to those with an animus towards the constabulary. It could be argued that this was one of the contributory factors behind the increasing involvement of Belfast's more "respectable Protestant classes" in riotous and anti-police behaviour during the latter phase of the 1886 riots.⁶⁰ Andrew Reed in his unpublished memoirs also seemed to believe that this

⁵⁶*Belfast Evening Telegraph*, 6 August 1886.

⁵⁷W. Shankhill, *The Belfast Riots, 1886. The Island men and Shankhill Road defended. Patronized by F.S.W. De Cobain Esq., M.P. Respectfully and affectionately dedicated to the Island men, and to the Orangemen of Ulster and of the United Kingdom* (Belfast, 1886), p.20.

⁵⁸Shankhill, *The Belfast Riots*, p.7.

⁵⁹'It is well known that beat of the drum excites the Irishman to such a degree that he loses all control over his actions. I think it very unfortunate that a large force of Irish Constabulary [*sic*] was, under the late government, drafted into Belfast from the country and I believe the conduct of some of these men is open to severe criticism'. *Hansard* 3, Volume CCCVIII, 5 August to 9 September 1886, p.27, Lord De Ros.

⁶⁰The Commission Report seemed to concur with this view, see *Report of the Belfast Riots Commissioners*, p.17. For this issue and other issues surrounding the politicisation of Belfast's Protestants see, P. Gibbon, *The Origins of Ulster Unionism. The Formation of Popular Protestant Politics and Ideology in Nineteenth-Century Ireland* (Manchester, 1975), pp. 67-86.

hatred of the police had permeated all levels of the Protestant community when he recalled that 'all Protestants in Belfast.... were opposed to the Constabulary; believing in fact that the Constabulary were sent there for the purpose of shooting down Protestants'.⁶¹

Underlying this oft-repeated Protestant hatred for the country constabulary was the erroneous assumption that policemen on detached duty from, for example, Tipperary were actually natives of that county, when in actuality R.I.C. regulations forbade a man serving in his county of birth. Therefore a Southern counties police detachment could, for argument's sake, contain more Northern Protestants than Southern Catholics.⁶² This mistaken belief was complicated by unfounded rumours that the Liberal Chief Secretary, John Morley, had "packed" Belfast with particularly large numbers of Catholic policemen to enforce Home Rule by the violent suppression of Protestant dissent. But, incredibly, neither the rumours nor the underlying assumption were definitively challenged by the R.I.C. until Andrew Reed spoke out at a magistrates' meeting on 7 August. The R.I.C.'s failure to make known both the rules regarding men serving in their county of birth and the Inspector General's sole responsibility to select men for service in Belfast would appear to have been cardinal errors, given that one of the main causes of the continuance of the riots was the hostility towards the R.I.C. and in particular its county detachments.

⁶¹Sir Andrew Reed, *Recollection of my Life* (1911), p.85 (123 page original typescript in the possession of Reed's grandson. Microfilm copy in the possession of Professor E.L. Malcolm, University of Melbourne).

⁶²In fact a large number of policemen from the Tipperary area were originally from Ulster, although not necessarily predominantly Protestant men, see *Belfast Riots Commission 1886, Minutes of Evidence*, p.245.

Although couched in diplomatic language, the Commissioners' report was critical in this regard stating 'it is profoundly to be regretted that no authoritative voice was raised to dispel these unhappy beliefs until.... the 7th August'.⁶³

The final phase of the Belfast riots was to Andrew Reed 'the most arduous and responsible duty I ever discharged in my whole service'.⁶⁴ The despatch of Reed to Belfast on 7 August to control the riots and restore calm was partly a tacit admission that the authorities in Belfast had failed thus far and partly an indication of how serious things had become. The riots flared up on 31 July after a Sunday School excursion led by Hugh Hanna was attacked by a Catholic mob. What followed was a now familiar scenario of internecine rioting between the two rival factions, accompanied by ever more bitter conflict with the R.I.C. - conflict that later involved increasing Catholic attacks on the police. The hostility towards the R.I.C. was overwhelming. Describing one attack Colonel Forbes R.M. said: 'so violent was the attack that two of them [policemen] in order to save their lives had to take refuge in private house [an earlier attempt by these R.I.C. men to disperse the crowd armed and using batons alone had] momentarily dispersed [the rioters] but they immediately reassembled, and if possible stoned the police still more violently'.⁶⁵ As the riots intensified so too did the demands upon the police and on 3 August Assistant Inspector General W. Colomb arrived in Belfast with a draft of 500 policemen drawn from the northern counties. This was augmented the following day

⁶³*Report of the Belfast Riots Commissioners*, p.17.

⁶⁴Reed, *Recollection*, p.81.

⁶⁵Report from Colonel Forbes R.M. to Under Secretary, Sir Robert Hamilton, Dublin Castle (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1886/19230/14141).

with a further 474 constables, who were in turn joined by thirty-seven more men on the 5th.

In the light of Cobain's inflammatory letter, Colomb felt compelled to detail his fears to Reed remarking that the letter,

would probably render the employment of the Constabulary almost impossible in Belfast except in very much larger numbers than at present [and gloomily concluding] the time seems to be approaching when a decision will have to be come as to whether the police should be withdrawn and the experiment tried of employing troops alone.⁶⁶

Colomb's confidential suggestion to Reed was the stalking horse for what was one of the most controversial decisions of the disturbances - the withdrawal of the R.I.C. from the Shankill.

It is not known what Reed's reply to Colomb was, but his being apprised of what his chief officer in Belfast was thinking on the day that the decision was actually made to withdraw the police, casts Reed's subsequent assertions in a new light. Reed, responding to the furore created by what *The Times* characterised as 'a dangerous experiment' and by what the new Chief Secretary, Sir Michael Hicks Beach, described as a 'unfortunate step',⁶⁷ distanced himself from the decision. In a report to the Under Secretary on 14 September, Reed remarked: 'I can only say that the step was taken before I took command in Belfast and I received no notice nor

⁶⁶Confidential Memorandum from Assistant Inspector General W. Colomb to Inspector-General Reed (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1886/19230).

⁶⁷*The Times*, 7 August 1886 and (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1886/19230, 15075/14776).

was I aware of it till after my arrival there'.⁶⁸ Reed arrived in Belfast on 7 August, and notwithstanding that detail, it could however be argued that his knowledge of what was being considered was tantamount to tacit agreement because he clearly did not forbid the withdrawal.

The withdrawal of the R.I.C. from the Shankill had begun as a limited resolution proposed on 5 August by two Resident Magistrates, Stokes and Hamilton.⁶⁹ This resolution sought to place the R.I.C. inside wrecked buildings and within their barracks rather than outside them, in an attempt to reduce their exposure in small parties to violence by large crowds. The resolution also determined that troops could act alone, under a magistrate's order, without the necessity of a police escort. Considering the degree of hostility prevailing against the police on the Shankill by that stage, this tentative move made tactical sense, however, the *de facto* abrogation of police responsibilities to the military was to assume the immediate guise of a withdrawal. That guise became a reality the following day when a magistrates' meeting chaired by Major-General Montgomery-Moore, G.O.C. Belfast, recommended a complete withdrawal of the constabulary from the Shankill. The meeting was divided, with Assistant Inspector General Cullen and Town Inspector Carr disagreeing with the move, but the decision driven by Stokes and Hamilton and assented to by Moore and Colomb, was taken. Despite Carr's protestations that 'the

⁶⁸Report from A. Reed I.G. to Under Secretary, 14 September 1886 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1886/19230, 16953/61706). Later Reed was to maintain this position in his evidence to the Commission which 'doubted the wisdom of this movement', see *Belfast Riots Commission 1886, Minutes of Evidence*, p.246 and their *Report*, p.14.

⁶⁹'Copy of Resolution passed at a Meeting of Magistrates on 5 Aug. 1886' (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1886/19230/16953/61706 (attached annex).

constabulary never gave up the custody of the Shankill Road entirely',⁷⁰ this was nevertheless the practical effect, and responsibility for the Shankill devolved upon infantry and cavalry piquets who were neither equipped by inclination nor design to be policemen.

The posting of Inspector General Reed to Belfast by Sir Michael Hicks Beach did not have an immediate effect on the course of the riots, but it did serve to galvanise those charged with their containment. Reed advised the Mayor to streamline the magistrates' meetings and form instead an Executive Committee of just thirteen to include the Mayor, the G.O.C., Reed, Divisional Magistrate, Town Inspector, local R.M.s and a representative selection of six local magistrates. This committee would direct the daily arrangements to restore order in the town and would be in complete contrast to the unwieldy fifty-man magistrates' meetings that had attempted to control events hitherto.

After addressing the magistrates with regard to the rumours about Morley "packing" Belfast and other related matters, Reed, cognisant of the police's failure thus far, detailed an adjutant, District Inspector Faussett:

to be constantly going about the different outposts, and to give instructions to the officers on the following points.... That more arrests should if possible be made.... that persons [congregating] at corners and causing obstructions, and who were likely to create a riot, should be requested to move on and arrested if they refused.... that officers should take every precaution to prevent the men firing without their orders, or those of magistrates, when they were present.... that young

⁷⁰*Belfast Riots Commission 1886, Minutes of Evidence*, p.17.

persons throwing stones or committing other offences, should be arrested, and dealt with under the “Summary Jurisdiction Order (Children) Act” [an Act which allowed children under twelve to be whipped if convicted], that any persons in disturbed districts suspected of having arms should be searched that they [R.I.C] should be on the alert to detect the presence of firearms or weapons.... that the men at points should move about and be on the alert to prevent any disturbance or violation of the law, in the vicinity of their posts. [He] also directed the officer to make inquiry as to whether any men were unusually long on duty, and if possible to have them relieved. Also that the Inspector General would hold the officers responsible if the men had not sufficient time to get their meals; [as Reed insisted] these orders were only emphasizing the existing instructions.⁷¹

But the necessity for the reiteration of these instructions showed the R.I.C. in Belfast had been operating at a less than optimum level.

Shortly after his arrival Reed considered an early return of the police to the Shankill. However, after meeting General Moore and being told by the latter that his troops would not act with an unarmed constabulary, Reed, fearing a bloodbath if his police moved aggressively into the Shankill, conceded that it would be better to wait until the time was propitious for their reinsertion. He was apparently isolated in his caution, his colleagues and subordinates urging him to ‘force police under arms on the Shankill people’, with a former senior Belfast policeman, J.L. Bailey, insisting the police, ‘shoot down all who opposed the law’!⁷²

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p.229.

⁷² Reed, *Recollection*, pp.86-7.

The rioting reached a crescendo on 7 and 8 August - a bloody weekend during which nine people died, four of whom succumbed to police rifle fire in one incident outside McKenna's public house on the Old Lodge Road. Amongst other incidents that occurred that weekend was a continuous gun battle which raged between the rival denominational factions for at least five hours, an engagement which later entered Belfast folklore as the "Battle of Springfield". After personally surveying the aftermath at McKenna's public house, Reed, concerned 'that we [the R.I.C.] were losing our moral influence with the people on account of being obliged to fire... thought the firing should now stop'.⁷³ Accordingly he issued orders to 'avoid firing if possible [and] to use the truncheon and make as many arrests as they could'.⁷⁴ He also decreed that the fifty-fifty mix of riflemen and baton men in each section should be restored and that no section should be less than twenty in number. Additionally he stipulated that police parties defending houses should not use their firearms to protect those houses, merely themselves *in extremis*.

It is difficult to gauge if Reed's intervention on the streets was decisive, but as the week progressed the level of arrests rose significantly,⁷⁵ the intensity of the rioting decreased and by 13 August the R.I.C. began limited 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. patrolling of the Shankill. Despite constant attempts by all sections of the Protestant community to keep the police from the Shankill and also remove them from other parts of Belfast, Reed resisted their imprecations and the unarmed policing of the Shankill was fully resumed on 1 September. On 28 August Reed confidently reported to the

⁷³ *Belfast Riots Commission 1886, Minutes of Evidence*, p.223.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p.223.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, Appendix B, pp. 577-583.



Plate Nine: Mob wrecking the tramway company's depot at Milltown.

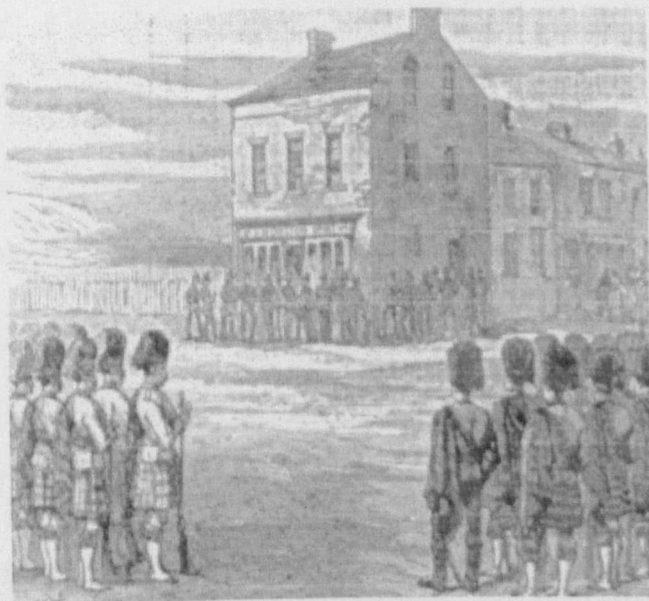


Plate Ten: Search for arms at McQuiston's spirit stores, Springfield Road. Both of the above drawings from *The Illustrated London News*, 21 August 1886.

Executive Committee that 'the general impression was that the riots were over, and that the violent feelings of the people were daily subsiding', ⁷⁶and he left for Dublin on 7 September.

Almost confounding Reed's optimism, Catholic rioters tried to seize Divis Streets R.I.C. barracks on 19 September. After nearly succeeding in the attempt, the rioters were beaten off by police rifle fire and three of their number were killed. It was, however, the last serious incident of the 1886 riots and, although rioting continued sporadically until 21 September, the riots were effectively over.

On 4 October the government-appointed Belfast Riots Commission began its deliberations with a broad remit ⁷⁷ and after interviewing 201 witnesses concluded its proceedings on 25 October. One of the commissioners, Commander Wallace B. McHardy, Chief Constable of Lanarkshire, disagreed with aspects of his colleagues' findings and later produced a separate report. The conclusions of the majority of the commissioners with regard to the R.I.C. and its conduct were almost as broad as their remit and often anodyne in tone, with criticisms being tempered by judicious qualifications. For example, whilst remarking that they deemed 'it probable that

⁷⁶*Report by One of the Commissioners of Inquiry*, p.46.

⁷⁷To 'inquire into the origin and circumstances of the said riots and disturbances, and the cause of their continuance, the existing local arrangements for the preservation of the peace of the town of Belfast, the magisterial jurisdiction exercised within it, and the amount and constitution and efficiency of the police force usually available there, and the proceedings undertaken by the magistrates, stipendiary and local, and other authorities, and the police force, on the occasion of the said riots and disturbances; and whether these authorities and the police force are adequate to the future maintenance of order and tranquillity within the town, and whether any and what steps ought to be taken, and whether any and what changes ought to be made in the local, magisterial, and police jurisdiction arrangements and establishment, with a view to the better preservation of the public peace, and the prevention or prompt suppression of riot and disorder', *Report of the Belfast Riots Commissioners*, p.3.

policemen.... made mistakes - nay more- did acts which cannot be defended [they did] not deem it [their] duty to notice particular charges'.⁷⁸ It was their duty as they saw it to look at the R.I.C. only in the broadest sense. There were however some fairly unambiguous remarks:

we cannot say that their [R.I.C.] action during the riots was as efficient as it might have been, [they lacked] single and efficient headship, the county police.... were rendered comparatively useless by absence of local knowledge, the Royal Irish Constabulary [was] notoriously of a quasi military character [whose] regulations fit it rather for rural than urban duties.⁷⁹

Despite these and other similar but generally coded criticisms, the majority of the commissioners were broadly supportive of the R.I.C. in their report asserting 'that nothing occurred during the riots to impair the high reputation which the Royal Irish Constabulary has at all times borne'.⁸⁰

Not unexpectedly, the most detailed submission to the government regarding the R.I.C. emanated from the minority commissioner's report. Commander McHardy, whose own Lanarkshire force was dealing with riots whilst he was finishing his report, went to extraordinary lengths to compile his contribution and at sixty-eight pages it was three times longer than that of the four-man commission's majority findings. McHardy's criticisms of the R.I.C. in Belfast were trenchant, and involved a wide range of issues from barrack sleeping arrangements to police drill, however, he saved his most incisive remarks for the conduct of the police during the riots. He

⁷⁸*Report of the Belfast Riots Commissioners*, p.20.

⁷⁹*Ibid.*, p.21 and p.19.

⁸⁰*Ibid*, p.20.

criticised the constabulary manning levels at the beginning of the riots as being either too little or too much. The latter was a 'cause for needless offence to a large... body of the industrial population', while the arming of the R.I.C. on duty in Belfast appears to have been contrary to the spirit, if not to the letter of the constabulary code, and...., in our opinion, whilst it certainly impaired the efficiency of the police force, may have tended to greatly increase the excitement and restless distrust stirred up in the anti-Home Rule party.⁸¹

Other forceful remarks pepper the report: in connection with the Coombe and Barbour incident, 'that one or more of the constables had used undue violence'; with regard to the school excursion that 'the police arrangements proved quite ineffective - either to safeguard the excursionists, to protect property, or to maintain order'; and in connection with the "Battle of the Springfield" he was 'completely at a loss to account for the inaction of the police'.⁸² These and similar comments amounted to a detailed critique of the R.I.C.'s conduct. Commander McHardy was careful not to condemn the constabulary outright, however, as no doubt he was aware, like his fellow commissioners, of the fragile state of peace in Belfast and the very real fear prevailing that Belfast's contagion could spread.⁸³ Nevertheless, in his four-point summation of the circumstances of the riots McHardy placed the blame solely on the constabulary with two of his conclusions: the arming of the R.I.C. for Belfast duties and its failure to appoint an early inquiry into the Bowershill shooting, either of

⁸¹ *Report by One of the Commissioners of Inquiry*, p.13.

⁸² *Ibid.*, pp. 36-7, p.43.

⁸³ Reed feared that 'the riots would have extended all over Ulster; the flame might have spread over Ireland, and God knows where it would terminate', Reed, *Recollection*, p.86.

which circumstance ‘was in itself sufficient to account for the continuance of the disturbances’.⁸⁴ Later remarks that ‘the police force in Belfast [was] well officered and ably manned’,⁸⁵ could not, however, disguise McHardy’s core belief that the R.I.C. had failed in Belfast during the 1886 riots.

The issue of the employment of special constables in Belfast was raised by McHardy, who evidently placed great store in their usefulness to the city. He devoted a page of his report to detailed suggestions on how the special constabulary should be organised and deployed. However, his comments, which owed much to his experience of the special constabulary in England, showed a degree of naivety or lack of knowledge of the realities of Belfast and its sectarian divisions. The future utilisation of special constables was not seriously entertained by the majority commissioners who remarked: ‘upon this point opinion in Belfast appears to be singularly unanimous....that the use of special constables would not be a successful arrangement for preserving the peace of the town’.⁸⁶ The matter was consequently allowed to drop.

One Ulster MP, T.W.Russell, remarked that ‘as a police force [the R.I.C. in Belfast] were a conspicuous failure. They had none of the instincts of policemen, but all the instincts of a military force’.⁸⁷ It was a public perception which was played out on the cobblestones of Belfast with the R.I.C. not only failing to contain the crowds with buckshot and ball, but also failing to employ such “civil” tactics as

⁸⁴*Report by One of the Commissioners of Inquiry*, p.49.

⁸⁵*Ibid*, p.50.

⁸⁶*Report of the Belfast Riots Commissioners*, p.19.

⁸⁷*Hansard* 3, Volume CCCVIII, 5 August to 9 September 1886, p.1037, Mr. T.W. Russell.

using the baton and arrest technique effectively to ensure a modicum of success. The tactics the police employed in Belfast exacerbated the situation almost from the outset, because they were based on the false premise that these mobs could be controlled virtually by rifle fire alone. Lord Sandhurst had earlier pointed to this defective tactic in a minute drafted after the 1872 riots, but it was a lesson that had not been learnt by 1886.⁸⁸ To be fair to the R.I.C., the urban riot training that they received at Depot was rudimentary and one R.I.C. officer who underwent the training clearly doubted its efficacy.⁸⁹ Further, there is no evidence to indicate that R.I.C. men underwent refresher training in urban riot control subsequently. Such an omission could only have been detrimental to their effectiveness in the white heat of Belfast's riots.

Whilst considering the use of deadly force in containing riots, one must also consider the R.I.C.'s overt reliance on the military who 'happen what might... were available to supply all deficiencies and to retrieve all blunders'.⁹⁰ The established practice of using troops in Belfast in these situations seemed to have led to complacency in the R.I.C., which, by default, allowed the riots to be prolonged affairs. Had they been tackled more expeditiously with the correct tactics, they might have been ended earlier. The constabulary were not exclusively at fault in this regard because their operational movements were often under the personal control of a local

⁸⁸Lord Sandhurst, *Minute by the Right Honourable Lord Sandhurst, G.C.B., G.C.S.I., Commander of the Forces, &c, &c. Belfast Riots - Means for Suppression, &c., &c.* (Dublin, 1872), (N.L.I., IR 32341, P49), pp. 6 and 2.

⁸⁹C.P. Crane, *Memories of a Resident Magistrate 1880-1920* (Edinburgh, 1938), p.142.

⁹⁰*Report by One of the Commissioners of Inquiry*, p.65.

magistrate who was frequently inept or indecisive. It was an imperfect arrangement and one that all the commissioners criticised. One magistrate in charge of an R.I.C. detachment on 7 August had a conscientious objection to taking life under any circumstances - hardly the best recipe for the control of armed men!!⁹¹

There were faults too in the way that the county police reinforcements were deployed: they were inadequately briefed, kept on the streets for too long and poorly housed and fed. In that state they could not have been operating efficiently. *The Belfast Newsletter* highlighted aspects of this in its reports,⁹² and Reed was obviously aware of the failings of his officers when he issued his instructions on his arrival in Belfast. He was later to issue a Constabulary Code amendment castigating 'some officers of the force, [who] especially when engaged on public duty, take little or no interest in the comfort of their men'.⁹³

Reed's orders to his officers and men upon coming to Belfast and the necessity for them showed how the situation had been allowed to drift. Yet neither Reed nor his subordinates could be absolved from blame. Reed's failure to publicly demonstrate his force's independence from the government of the day ensured that the wildest rumours regarding the R.I.C. were propagated by and amongst an historically antipathetic Protestant community, encouraged by an almost universally hostile press.⁹⁴ Those rumours and the climate they engendered ensured the

⁹¹*Report of the Belfast Riots Commissioners*, p.20, and *Report by One of the Commissioners of Inquiry*, p.68.

⁹²*BNL*, 9 June and 19 August 1886.

⁹³Royal Irish Constabulary circulars, August 1882 - July 1900 (N.L.I., IR 3522 R3, Code Amendment 6 June 1891), p.1.

⁹⁴According to Reed and others in their evidence to the Commission *The Northern*

continuance of the riots. If Reed had made clear his operational independence sooner, then his meeting on 7 August might not have been considered ‘the turning point of affairs through the town’⁹⁵ and the riots may well have been more speedily resolved.

The decision to withdraw the constabulary from the Shankill was a formal admission of the failure of police tactics, and whilst it is fair to point out that Reed might not have been able to override the decision in Belfast from Dublin, he could have expressly forbidden his subordinates to assent to the move. The withdrawal of the R.I.C. from the Shankill Road gave the rioters the impression that they had mastered the police and encouraged “respectable Protestant citizens” to think that they could ‘drive the constabulary out of Belfast’ and replace them with their own local council controlled force.⁹⁶

The commissioners remarked ‘that it was generally difficult to say who was in command in Belfast’.⁹⁷ It is probable that the disablement of the two officers, Carr and Stritch, had a significant impact on the direction of police operations in the early stages of the riots, however, there were constant changes in the police command structure subsequently. Between 9 June and 30 September there were nine changes in the chief police officer in Belfast and this lack of continuity at the highest level

Whig was the only paper that was generally supportive throughout. *Belfast Riots Commission 1886, Minutes of Evidence*, p.312.

⁹⁵*Belfast Riots Commission 1886, Minutes of Evidence*, p.263.

⁹⁶Reed, *Recollection*, p.86, Reed feared that ‘leading persons in Belfast were preparing a strong case against the R.I.C. with a view to inducing the Commission to recommend its removal and the re-establishment there of a local police force’, Reed, *Recollection*, p.93. This was the fear in the Catholic community too, see for example, *Belfast Riots Commission 1886, Minutes of Evidence*, p.511.

⁹⁷*Belfast Riots Commission 1886, Minutes of Evidence*, p.18.

must have had implications for operational efficiency.

If there was a lack of continuity in leadership, there was considerable continuity in the methodology used to control the riots, a methodology which by 1886 had reached a state of almost total inertia. That is to say there is little evidence to suggest that the R.I.C. learnt or were taught anything new as each Belfast riot repeated itself throughout the nineteenth century. Because of the peculiar nature of violent and popular resistance to the R.I.C. in Belfast it would probably have been impossible to consider riot containment with wholly unarmed policemen.⁹⁸ Despite that limitation, there were policing methods which, had they been adopted, might have ameliorated the violence. If, for example, the R.I.C. had reassessed their use of country detachments in the light of their own and English police experience after the 1872 riots and pressed for a permanent increase in the local Belfast force the events of 1886 may not have assumed such a serious aspect.⁹⁹

Frankfort Moore, summing up his account of the 1886 riots, concluded: 'It may, therefore, I think, be said that the spirit of resistance to authority got the better of authority in Belfast at that time'.¹⁰⁰ Whilst no-one in officialdom would have publicly dared to agree with him had he written that at the time, the facts were

⁹⁸As Reed commented 'in Belfast, so long as the mobs carry rifles, the unfortunate constabulary cannot be left without a similar arm to defend themselves', *Belfast Riots Commission 1886, Minutes of Evidence*, p.229.

⁹⁹Carolyn Steedman's study of the English provincial forces details the antipathy felt by some local borough communities towards county police reinforcements in riot situations. See, C. Steedman, *Policing the Victorian Community: The Formation of English Provincial police forces, 1856-80* (London, 1984), pp. 32-8. There were obvious implications of cost to the Belfast Council in any permanent increase of strength, but in the light of Belfast's past travails it was an issue that should have been seriously addressed.

¹⁰⁰Moore, *The Truth about Ulster*, p.69.

incontrovertible. Publicly the failures of the R.I.C. in Belfast were aired in the commissioners' inquiry reports and the implication that they would not be allowed to re-occur was implicit in Chief Secretary Arthur Balfour's determination, 'that the arrangements for dealing with any disturbances that may arise in Belfast are better than they have been on any previous occasion'.¹⁰¹

Privately the R.I.C. began to "set its house in order": District Inspector Grene was punished by the expedient of two unfavourable records and his career never recovered; five other District Inspectors present during the riots were moved within months of the riots; and the government transferred the two Belfast Resident Magistrates, Colonel Forbes and Mr. McCarthy, in 1887.¹⁰² The special code of regulations for Belfast recommended by the Inquiry Commissioners to civilianise and urbanise the Belfast police force was later produced, despite Reed's opposition to it at the inquiry.¹⁰³ The phrasing of these regulations made explicit the tactical failures of the R.I.C. in 1886 and contained specific instructions to ensure that such failures did not reoccur.¹⁰⁴ The rules regarding transfers of policemen from Belfast were further relaxed in another attempt to localise the force and rural reinforcements were never again used in such numbers on the streets of Belfast. As a consequence of

¹⁰¹ *Hansard* 3, Volume CCCXVI, 14 June to 6 July 1887, p.1500-1, Mr. A.J. Balfour.

¹⁰² Royal Irish Constabulary officers register 1817-1914, vols i-iii: (P.R.O.(L), H.O., 184/45-47), *List of Officers who have served in Belfast for the past 20 years, Belfast Police Commission 1906* (N.A.I., S.P.O., Misc. and Official Papers, 1876-1922, Parcel 6), *Hansard* 3, Volume CCCXIII, 31 March to 25 April 1887, p.489, Mr. Sexton, respectively.

¹⁰³ *Belfast Police Manual. Compiled for the Use of the Royal Irish Constabulary serving in the Town of Belfast* (Belfast, 1888). Reed thought such a code was not 'necessary [or] advisable', *Belfast Riots Commission 1886, Minutes of Evidence*, p.234.

¹⁰⁴ *Belfast Police Manual*, pp.13 and 29.

1886 both the R.I.C. and the government decided thereafter, *de facto* if not *de jure*, that the policing of Belfast would be handled differently compared to the rest of Ireland.

The folk memory of the 1886 riots endured and guaranteed that the prevailing dislike of the Belfast R.I.C., particularly in Protestant quarters, continued well into the twentieth century. As one former Belfast Police Commissioner wrote in 1912:

The reasons for this unpopularity with Protestants are many and the people recollect, and tell their children, of the shooting of their relatives in 1886 by country police, who were badly handled and awkwardly situated.¹⁰⁵

It must be said in conclusion that the R.I.C. in Belfast during the 1886 riots were in the words of the commissioners 'subjected to almost unparalleled trials'¹⁰⁶ and there are many cases of individual police gallantry and high standards of discipline within the pages of the commission evidence, however, as a collective body the R.I.C. to an extent created and lost the contest of wills in 1886.

¹⁰⁵ Letter from T.F. Singleton, Commissioner of Police, Belfast, from 3 October 1889 to 28 June 1896 to Inspector General Sir Neville Chamberlain, 24 August 1912 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1912/15601.)

¹⁰⁶ *Report of the Belfast Riots Commissioners*, p.20.

CHAPTER VI

THE FIRST STAND OF THE R.I.C.

On 6 May 1907 some fifty dockers unloading a vessel at the York Dock in Belfast withdrew their labour in protest at the employment of a non-union man by their employer, the Belfast Steam-Shipping Company. James Larkin, the organiser of the fledgeling Dockers and Carters' Union which represented the men, believed their action was precipitate and attempted to mediate with the company management. His overtures were rebuffed and on 8 May the company brought in fifty labourers from Liverpool to replace the striking men - a move that prompted the remaining Belfast Steam-Shipping Company dockers to walk out. The issue of union recognition was the catalyst for a bitter industrial dispute which soon involved all sections of the Belfast dockers' community.

This widespread sympathetic action coupled with militant picketing imposed a great strain on the resources of the Belfast R.I.C. As the strike continued policemen found themselves working between twelve and eighteen hours daily, without overtime. A decision by the authorities to provide additional plain-clothes escorts to motor wagons and in particular "blackleg" carters on 19 July placed extra difficulties on the shoulders of hard-pressed R.I.C. men. This move exacerbated the mood of policemen, already disaffected before the strike, and as a consequence they agitated openly for redress over matters of pay and working conditions. *The Irish News* called the police agitation 'the

first stand of the R.I.C.¹ and a later commentator has suggested that the R.I.C. men were ‘infected’ by the political tensions of the dock strike.² However the policemen’s actions can more properly be viewed in light of grievances which were recurrent and non-political.

Between 28 July and 11 August 1882 R.I.C constables in Limerick instigated a protest which spread in varying degrees throughout the constabulary. There had been simmering discontent over long-standing matters of low pay, poor working conditions and living standards that had been made worse by the exceptional demands placed upon the men, both in physical and financial terms, during the 1879-82 Land War.³ Despite the hectorism of Limerick’s special resident magistrate, Clifford Lloyd, and the personal intervention of the Inspector General, Robert Bruce, during which he accused the Limerick men of mutiny,⁴ the R.I.C rank-and-file held firm. Press and public comment was generally supportive, although *The Times* frequently struck a sour note and in one article accused the Limerick men of ‘tampering with mutiny’.⁵ It was a charge not entirely without foundation, and although it was not the first time Irish policemen had defied authority,⁶ it was certainly the most serious occasion. As one observer recalled:

¹ *IN*, 30 July 1907.

² J. Boyd, *Sunday News*, 4 March 1979.

³ For a full account of the Limerick agitation, see W.J. Lowe, “The Constabulary Agitation of 1882”, *Irish Historical Studies*, xxxi, 121 (May 1998), pp. 37-59

⁴ Inspector General’s proceedings at Limerick on 5th instant, 10 August 1882 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1882/34131).

⁵ *The Times*, 30 August 1882.

⁶ On 13 December 1853 thirty-two sub-constables and one constable were dismissed from the Irish Constabulary in Monaghan for ‘refus [ing] to be sworn at a Court of

‘Constables threw down their arms while refusing to go on duty’. He further commented, ‘that the same thing happened in cases of individual policemen in different parts of the Southern and Western Counties’.⁷ Despite their concern about the serious threat to discipline⁸, the government recognised the validity of the men’s claims and resolved to tackle the matter expeditiously before the situation worsened.

On 24 August 1882 the government appointed a committee to inquire into the pay, pensions, allowances and privileges of the R.I.C., and the committee’s recommendations were embodied in the Constabulary and Police (Ireland) Act, 1883 (46 & 47 Vict. c. 14.). Whilst the act’s passage substantially addressed the men’s grievances, there was a feeling in some quarters of the R.I.C. rank and file that this was not entirely satisfactory, one policeman later remarking:

Remember 82! when, after a “Commission” gave us 1s per week with one hand and took it back with the other for barrack rent, a certain Government official boasted that he gave them (the R.I.C.) the kid glove with an iron hand inside.⁹

This continuing discontent among some R.I.C. men meant that the events of 1882 had somewhat the air of an armistice about them. This was particularly so in Belfast where

Inquiry [and] behaving in a disrespectful and tumultuous manner’. *Return of the Names of Members of the Constabulary who have been Rewarded, Dismissed, Disrupted and Fined, during the Three Months ended 31st December, 1853* (Trinity College Library, Dublin, Goulden Papers, MS 7376).

⁷Sir David Harrel, *Recollections and Reflections* (1926), p.61 (223 page typescript in the possession of the John Rylands Library, Manchester, Tynan Collection).

⁸*Hansard* 3, Volume CCLXXIII, 28 July to 18 August 1882, p.963, Mr. Trevelyan.

⁹*IN*, 2 August 1907.

support for the Limerick men had been strong.¹⁰

Notwithstanding the matter of “unfinished business”, the speedy resolution of the 1882 agitation masked a deeper problem. Constabulary regulations stated, that no man is permitted to complain on behalf of another, every man being held to be the best judge of his own grievances [and] when two or more members of the force have an application to make, it is not to be drawn up and signed by all of them collectively, but it is to be written and signed by the senior of the party.¹¹

These regulations were, as *The Constabulary Gazette* maintained, the ‘means of finding and earmarking an agitator or ringleader [with the result being that] no such applications reach the authorities’.¹² Two factors added to the policemen’s difficulties: firstly the R.I.C. were prohibited from voting in either municipal or parliamentary elections, and secondly, in the event that the authorities might wish to improve the men’s pay this could only be done through parliamentary legislation. Thus the men were ‘confronted with a choice of two alternatives, either to suffer in silence or revolt’¹³ - a fact later made abundantly clear during the Inspector General’s evidence to the Irish Police Committee in 1914.¹⁴

¹⁰*Royal Irish Constabulary. Evidence taken before the Committee of Inquiry, 1901. With Appendix.* [C1094], H.C. and H.L. 1902, p.116.

¹¹[W. Harding], *The RIC. A Plea for Reform* (Dublin, 1907), p.2.

¹²*Ibid.*, p.3. This problem for the police rank and file was eloquently debated in the Parliamentary sessions concerning the R.I.C. dissent. See *Hansard* 3, Volume CCLXXIII, 28 July to 18 August 1882, pp. 756 and 940, Mr. Callan.

¹³[Harding], *The RIC*, p.2.

¹⁴*Royal Irish Constabulary and Dublin Metropolitan Police. Report of the Committee of Inquiry, 1914.* [C7421], H.C. 1914, xliv, 247, p.183.

The hope expressed by one of the 1882 commissioners that the R.I.C. had ‘settled down to zealous discharge of duty’¹⁵ was a somewhat forlorn one, because in 1900 rank and file policemen in Belfast issued an anonymous circular requesting their colleagues throughout Ireland to gather and discuss pay and conditions of service. It was contrary to regulations, but the authorities connived at this and allowed the men to assemble countrywide and submit their grievances. The government instituted a Committee of Inquiry on 20 May 1901, amid high hopes of redress by constabulary members. But, from the outset, the government committee was unsympathetic. Colonel Sir Howard Vincent, the chairman, had written *Vincent's Police Code* and the *General Manual of the Criminal Law* and it was clear during the submission of evidence that his views were antipathetic to the policemen’s claims.¹⁶ Policemen giving evidence were subjected to close and at times hostile questioning by all members of the committee and the final report was little more than a rebuff, its results later being characterised by *The Irish News* as ‘barren’.¹⁷ In an appraisal of the 1901 Committee’s report, Deputy Inspector General Heffernan Considine later wrote:

Of these recommendations those only which did not require legislation were made operative, and these affected largely the higher ranks only. The pay of the Constables remained and remains exactly as it was in 1883, but a small addition has been made to the allowance of the married men. This report was undoubtedly a very great

¹⁵David Harrell, *Recollections and Reflections*, p.63.

¹⁶See, *Royal Irish Constabulary. Evidence taken before the Committee of Inquiry, 1901*, p.24 and [Harding], *The RIC*, pp. 25-26.

¹⁷*IN*, 2 August 1907.

disappointment to the Force, and the disappointment was accentuated by the failure to give effect, in their entirety, to even the inadequate recommendations as they were regarded.¹⁸

However, it is fair to say that the constables and non-commissioned officers could scarcely have chosen a worse time to air their grievances. Between 1891 and 1900, resignations from the force totalled only 14 per cent, 'the smallest proportion in the Constabulary's history',¹⁹ and the Commandant of the R.I.C. Depot, Thomas Singleton, made it clear in his submission that whilst there was evidence of dissatisfaction there was almost a superfluity of recruits.²⁰ Further, the Committee was at pains to indicate 'the pecuniary advantages which it was said the Royal Irish Constabulary [had] over police in Great Britain [and whilst it was invidious to] draw any parallel with Great Britain, because the conditions of police service in Ireland [were] so essentially different',²¹ nevertheless the comparisons dealt a fatal blow to the R.I.C. men's case. Although the Inspector General championed the cause of the R.I.C. rank and file with regard to the limited recommendations made by the 1901 Committee,²² his efforts were in vain.

¹⁸Memorandum from Deputy Inspector General H. Considine to Inspector General N. Chamberlain, 29 July 1907 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1908/20333).

¹⁹W.J. Lowe and E.L. Malcolm, "The Domestication of the Royal Irish Constabulary, 1836-1922," *Irish Economic Social History*, xix (1992), p.44.

²⁰*Royal Irish Constabulary. Evidence taken before the Committee of Inquiry, 1901*, p.146.

²¹*Royal Irish Constabulary and Dublin Metropolitan Police. Report of the Committee of Inquiry, 1914*, pp. 179 and 190.

²²"The recent indiscipline of certain members of the Royal Irish Constabulary in Belfast", 14 September 1907 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1908/20333).

Table 1: Royal Irish Constabulary Resignations 1883-1913

Year	Resignations	Year	Resignations	Year	Resignations
1883	293	1894	66	1905	58
1884	138	1895	56	1906	45
1885	123	1896	75	1907	99
1886	142	1897	58	1908	123
1887	152	1898	65	1909	115
1888	102	1899	70	1910	143
1889	102	1900	96	1911	163
1890	137	1901	116	1912	224
1891	121	1902	156	1913	299
1892	84	1903	85		
1893	76	1904	74	Total	3,656

Source: *Royal Irish Constabulary and Dublin Metropolitan Police. Report of the Committee of Inquiry, 1914*, [C7421], HC 1914, xliv, 247, p.8.

But the injustice of the 1901 Inquiry rankled. One Belfast constable remarked that the men were, continually brooding over the treatment that they have received. It is not an uncommon thing for groups of men to meet together when opportunity arises and to discuss the matter. While their minds are so engaged with this absorbing matter it is bound to withdraw their attention from their active duties, and I am confident that it has done so in a very large number of cases.²³

The Belfast Critic believed that what quickly became known as the “More Pay Movement”, was a worthwhile endeavour and made common cause with the Belfast

²³ *Report of the Belfast Police Commission, 1906* (N.A.I., S.P.O., Misc. and Official Papers, 1876-1922, Parcel 6), p.39.

Table 2: Royal Irish Constabulary Rates of Pay 1872-1913

Rank from 1 Dec 1872	Rank from 18 June 1883	Rank from 21 Dec 1908
Head Constable Major: £104	Head Constable Major: £104	Head Constable Major: £104
1st Class Head Constable: £91	Head Constable Over 6 years: £104	Head Constable Over 5 years: £104
2nd Class Head Constable: £83 4s	Do. Over 3 years: £97 10s	Do. Under 5 years: £97 10s
Constable: £72 16s	Do. Under 3 years: £91	Sergeant Over 4 years: £83 4s
Acting Constable: £67 12s	Sergeant Over 4 years: £80 12s	Do. Under 4 years: £78
Sub Constable Over 20 years service: £62 8s	Do. Under 4 years: £75 8s	Acting Sergeant: £75 8s
Do. Over 14 years : £59 16s	Acting Sergeant: £72 16s	Constable Over 25 years: £72 16s
Do. Over 8 years : £57 4s	Constable Over 20 years: £70 4s	Do. Over 15 years: £70 4s
Do. Over 4 years : £54 12s	Do. Over 15 years: £67 12s	Do. Over 13 years: £67 12s
Do. Over 6 months: £52	Do. Over 12 years: £65	Do. Over 11 years: £65
Do. Under 6 months: £39	Do. Over 9 years: £62 8s	Do. Over 7 years: £62 8s
	Do. Over 7 years: £59 16s	Do. Over 4 years: £57 12s
	Do. Over 4 years: £57 4s	Do. Over 6 months: £54 12s
	Do. Over 6 months: £54 12s	Do. Under 6 months: £39
	Do. Under 6 months: £39	

Source: *Royal Irish Constabulary and Dublin Metropolitan Police. Report of the Committee of Inquiry, 1914*, [C7421], HC 1914, xlv, 247, p.4.

men in its columns, stating: 'The men feel that they have a good case, and they have got a solid backing in the general public, who feel that their duties entitle them to more than

the present extremely niggardly rate of pay'.²⁴ However, Dublin Castle was unmoved by such displays of solidarity with the Belfast constabulary and there the matter rested until 1906.

The majority of the issues raised by the 1906 Belfast Police Commission have been covered elsewhere in this thesis but two issues, promotion and pay and allowances, are relevant to this chapter. The first, promotion, fell within the Commission's remit and was tackled in detail; the second, pay and allowances, plainly obtruded into the deliberations of the Commission and in this context the chairman, Matthew Bourke, was moved to remark:

Various police witnesses, throughout the Inquiry, made considerable efforts to impress us with the grievances of the men in various respects in the matter of pay. We intimated, early in the proceedings, that these were topics outside the scope of our Inquiry....Incidentally, however,....questions as to the justice and adequacy of certain arrangements and allowances did force themselves on our attention.²⁵

The commission closed its proceedings on 9 June, and its conclusions and recommendations on promotion and allowances can best be summarised thus:

a deep and widespread feeling of discontent exists in the Belfast Police Force on the subject of promotion especially in reference to the cases of two junior men named Kerr and Walker recently promoted. The commissioners do not think that adequate grounds existed for the promotion of Walker over the heads of men senior to him,

²⁴ *The Belfast Critic*, 1 March 1902.

²⁵ *Report of the Belfast Police Commission, 1906*, p.8.

possessing equal, if not superior, qualifications; and suggest certain precautions to be taken by the I.G. to prevent the recurrence of such promotion in future....In

conclusion, the Commission mention the following matters in regard to allowances,

etc., to which their attention was called: 1. insufficient lodging allowance; 2.

insufficient fuel and light allowance, and that expense of cleaning barracks should

not be thrown on the men; 3. severe penalty attached to the offence of marrying

without leave; 4. non-payment of charge allowance to Station Sergeants at stations to

which Head Constables are attached; 5. insufficiency of night watch allowance.²⁶

Despite these conclusions and recommendations and despite incontrovertible evidence of low morale within the pages of the report,²⁷ the Chief Secretary James Bryce viewed the report in a poor light: 'The report is unsatisfactory....I see nothing to be gained by publishing it'.²⁸ The Under Secretary Sir Antony MacDonnell was dismissive of the men's claims, remarking:

In regard to the matter of promotion, no convincing reasons are given that any substantial abuses exist, although in two cases the Superintendent seems to have allowed his personal preferences to influence him overmuch [and with regard to pay and allowances] in view of the recent Inquiry by Sir Howard Vincent's Committee it

²⁶Minute from the Chief Secretary's Office on the Belfast Commission, 6 September 1906 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1907/5541/19585).

²⁷For a sample of these see, *Report of the Belfast Police Commission, 1906*, pp. 6, 65, 99, 134.

²⁸Memorandum from Under Secretary A.P. MacDonnell to Chief Secretary J. Bryce, 4 December 1906 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1907/5541/19585).

is not one of pressing importance.²⁹

The Inspector General was 'disappointed' with the report but in a 'Strictly Private' memorandum, which showed barely suppressed anger, Chamberlain attacked its basic presumptions.³⁰ When later asked to give his opinion on the commission's conclusions to the Chief Secretary's Office, his views were unambiguous:

I would however, most strongly deprecate the publication of any such explanation or return, and also the comments of the Commissioners on the promotion of Constables Kerr and Walker. I desire to record my opinion that it would be highly detrimental to the public interests as, I have no doubt whatever, it will be highly detrimental to the discipline and contentment of this Force, if such confidential matters connected with the administration of the Royal Irish Constabulary are made public. I have felt it my duty to make this protest and I look forward with confidence to the support of Government in the matter.³¹

Although the commission's findings resulted in the disciplining of some Belfast detectives and changes in the allocation of the Belfast detective force, Chamberlain's strictures ensured the burial of the report. When questions were asked about its fate in parliament, James Bryce's successor, Augustine Birrell, replied bluntly: 'Mr Bryce....decided that it was not necessary or desirable to present it. I do not propose to

²⁹*Ibid.*

³⁰'Report of Belfast Police Commission 1906', 22 August 1906 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1907/5541).

³¹Minute from Neville Chamberlain to the Under Secretary, 24 January 1907 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1907/5541/4648).

reopen the Question'.³² Thus was lost one of the best opportunities since 1882 of not only redressing the grievances of the Belfast rank-and-file, but also those of many R.I.C. men in other urban areas.

Angry at being ignored and desperate for some redress over a pay scale that had not improved for twenty-five years, the men of the illegal "More Pay Movement" began to organise themselves in earnest. Constable Fox and Sergeant De Vere, both being 'leading spirits', initially headed the movement together with a Sergeant Kerrigan.³³ Although the discontent had existed for 'sometime'³⁴ prior to the 1907 agitation, it is difficult to judge whether it would have flourished or withered on the vine had the Belfast men been fairly treated during that summer. Two decisions by the police authorities however ensured conflict. Policemen working continuously for over eight hours were entitled to receive one shilling extra, but from the onset of the dock strike they were consistently pulled from duty just before the eight hours elapsed and then restarted afterwards, thus obviating the need for the allowance. Further, the men were

³²Copy of Parliamentary Reply, 8 March 1907 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1907/5541/4649).

³³The recent indiscipline of certain members of the Royal Irish Constabulary in Belfast, 14 September 1907 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1908/20333) and Confidential Reply by the Belfast Police Commissioner Hugh O'H. Hill to a Memorandum from Inspector General N. Chamberlain, 20 November 1907 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1908/20333/25609). Both sergeants gave evidence at the 1906 Commission which upset the higher echelons of the R.I.C., although De Vere's evidence was 'mild compared with the wild statements made by Sergeant Kerrigan', *Ibid.*, p.2.

³⁴Memorandum from Under Secretary A.P. MacDonnell to Chief Secretary A. Birrell, 8 October 1907 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1908/20333/21891). It is not known precisely what form the "More Pay Movement" took. "Willing to Strike", the anonymous Belfast policeman, wrote to *The Irish News* on 10 July that 'a Larkin is needed amongst us.... [complaining] We have.... no organisation', whether he was referring to the Belfast force's travails or talking in more countrywide terms is not known.

often assigned to places some distance from their home stations, but later denied the tram fare. Such parsimony added fuel to an already volatile situation and the decision to provide additional plain-clothes escorts to motor wagons on 19 July provided the spark. One constable, William Barrett, refused to do the duty and was disciplined on the spot.

Later that week Barrett, met with at least five other constables to discuss the situation. Barrett, now the prime mover in the "More Pay Movement", and his colleagues drafted a circular which was issued to all Belfast police barracks. This was later published in *The Irish News*.³⁵ The circular was not exactly the stuff of revolt and merely listed familiar grievances. Nevertheless the meeting and the circular were contrary to police regulations.

The circular gave instructions for all the Belfast force to meet at Musgrave Street barracks at 7 p.m. on 24 July. On the 23rd Belfast's Acting Commissioner Henry Morell banned the proposed gathering. Morell's injunction was ignored and the following evening between 200 and 300 men assembled at Musgrave Street. The meeting was a stormy one and when Morell attempted to intervene he was knocked down. He and his assistant 'were driven from the room; tables and forms were overturned and the police cheered defiance to all authority'.³⁶ Eventually calm was restored and the policemen

³⁵The circular's proposals to be discussed were; 'I. A rise of pay of 1s per day per man. II. That our pension on leaving be calculated as three-fourths of pay. III. To appoint a solicitor to draw up a petition in a legal form, and submit same to his Majesty's Government. IV. To apply to the Inspector General by wire for his permission to submit same. V. General'. [The circular further enjoined its members] 'you are not required to do anything underhand or injurious to your positions', *IN*, 23 July 1907

³⁶*BNL*, 3 August 1907.

nominated five constables to negotiate, and these men all agreed to meet Morell on Saturday 27 July.

Dublin Castle and the police authorities in Belfast were allegedly surprised by the meeting and claimed that they 'knew nothing of the existence of discontent among the Belfast Police Force' until Morell received the circular, although that stance was later changed to 'the earliest notice that this office had of any trouble in the Police Force in Belfast was from the notice in the newspapers of Thursday, the 25th July'.³⁷ Perhaps these contradictory statements by the Under Secretary Sir Antony MacDonnell were a *post facto* attempt to disguise the fact that he was personally out of touch with the policing aspects of his department - work for which it was said he had a 'abhorrence'.³⁸ Whether or not the Irish executive were surprised is perhaps a moot point, but they were certainly embarrassed and publicly there were attempts to deny the gravity of the situation. Augustine Birrell stated in Parliament that:

the circumstances seem to be greatly exaggerated. Some cases of insubordination occurred amongst a small body of men - not anything like 200 - but they yielded at once to the very wise treatment they received, and I am now assured that all danger

³⁷Memorandum from Under Secretary A.P. MacDonnell to Chief Secretary A. Birrell, 30 July 1907 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1908/20333) and 'History of Military and Police arrangements in connection with the Police agitation in Belfast', a memorandum from MacDonnell to Birrell, 7 August 1907.

³⁸W.F. Mandle, 'Sir Antony MacDonnell and Crime Branch Special', in O. MacDonagh and W.F. Mandle (eds.), *Ireland and Irish-Australia: Studies in Cultural and Political History* (London, 1986), p.176.

may be at once dismissed from our minds.³⁹

This information was passed to Birrell by Morell⁴⁰ and would seem to have been an attempt by the latter to hide his mishandling of the situation and protect his career. The unionist press eagerly accepted this version of events and condemned *The Irish News* report.⁴¹ However, *The Irish News* version was the correct one and the attempt by the government and the unionist press to minimise the cause that the Belfast men espoused only served to provoke the malcontents. On 27 July Barrett wrote to *The Irish News* confirming the accuracy of its report. This action by Barrett ran counter to police regulations and Barrett was officially suspended with immediate effect.

Barrett's suspension further antagonised the Belfast policemen and, despite a ban by the Inspector General on any such meeting, between 600 and 800 men gathered that evening in the barrack square at Musgrave Street. This meeting, unlike the first, was a very public affair with journalists in attendance, and as the proceedings continued civilian and trade union strikers together with 'levies from the slums of Smithfield and Millfield'⁴² swelled the numbers. It was, as one constable's wife succinctly put it, a

³⁹*Hansard 4*, Volume 179, 25 July to 6 August 1907, p.149, Mr. A. Birrell.

⁴⁰Transcribed telephone conversation between Acting Commissioner H. Morell and the Chief Secretary A. Birrell, 25 July 1907 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1908/20333). *The Irish News* had accused Morell of 'behav [ing] like a martinet', *IN*, 25 July 1907 and it is clear from the C.S.O., R.P., file that MacDonnell had Morell 'in his sights', See wire from MacDonnell to Birrell, 27 July 1907.

⁴¹*IN*, 25 July 1907, for unionist press comment see, *BNL*, 26 July 1907 and the *NW*, 26 July 1907.

⁴²*BNL*, 29 July 1907.

mixture the 'washed and unwashed'.⁴³ Morell and District Inspector J. Gelston addressed the crowd stating that the petition Barrett and the other policemen had lodged with them would be given due consideration by all in authority. Morell, who had disobeyed Chamberlain's orders in addressing the gathering,⁴⁴ was not well received and when Barrett intervened to restore calm the officers withdrew in some disorder. The crowd, chairing Barrett, then ebbed and flowed between the barracks and the Custom House steps, eventually investing Morell's office. Morell, who believed that 'the situation look[ed] very bad', was implored by the disaffected policemen 'to remove the suspension of Barrett',⁴⁵ but this he declined to do. Morell, previously told that Assistant Inspector General Alexander Gambell was on his way, informed the policemen 'that they could make their application to him'⁴⁶ when he arrived. This news seemed to placate the dissidents somewhat and they agreed to reconvene as soon as Gambell reached Belfast.

Assistant Inspector General Gambell had been nominated to replace Morell and, after receiving 'verbal instructions'⁴⁷ from the Under Secretary, he was despatched with an uncompromising remit which obviously had the stamp of MacDonnell upon it. Gambell reached Belfast around 8.00 that evening, but his message was a bleak one -

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴Memorandum from Inspector General Chamberlain to County Inspector Morell, 26 July 1907(N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1908/20333/16713).

⁴⁵Telephone Message from Acting Commissioner to Inspector General N. Chamberlain, 27 July 1907 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1908/20333).

⁴⁶*Ibid.*

⁴⁷'History of Military and Police arrangements', memorandum (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1908/20333).

Barrett would not be reinstated. This was an absolute prerequisite for the Belfast men and they received the news with considerable anger. Undoubtedly the initiative at that stage was with the activists, because the authorities had been under pressure since early June ⁴⁸ to offer adequate police protection to the imported labourers and carters and as requests from ship owners increased, Morell was forced to concede on 27 July that 'with the present position of police affairs protection is utterly out of the question'.⁴⁹

The time was clearly propitious for the malcontents as 'Willing to Strike' an anonymous Belfast constable, made plain in a letter to *The Irish News*. But the 'Napoleon of the coup d'état',⁵⁰ William Barrett, despite his rhetoric, was no Larkin and throughout the meeting was moderation personified. At the news that the police authorities would not rescind his suspension order, Barrett merely counselled the men to wait upon the outcome of the petition, adding: 'if I am not reinstated within the week, you will know what to do'.⁵¹ His stance was adopted by other speakers who addressed the crowd, among them James Sexton, the Secretary of the Dockers' Union, whose 'cool measured tones fell upon his hearers like drops of icy water', and Sexton's colleague, Alex Stewart, whose 'speech somewhat damped the exuberance of the less determined

⁴⁸The Dockers strike in Belfast and Police protection, 13 June 1907, a memorandum from H. O'H. Hill to N. Chamberlain (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1908/20333/90128). The correspondence between the City of Dublin Steam Packet Company and H. O'H. Hill on 10 June provide a good example of the problems the R.I.C. faced in Belfast at that time (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1908/20333).

⁴⁹Telephone Message from Acting Commissioner to Deputy Inspector General, 27 July 1907 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1908/20333/16826).

⁵⁰*IN*, 22 and 25 July 1907, respectively.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 29 July 1907. Although unstated, the clear implication was that they would strike at the week's end.

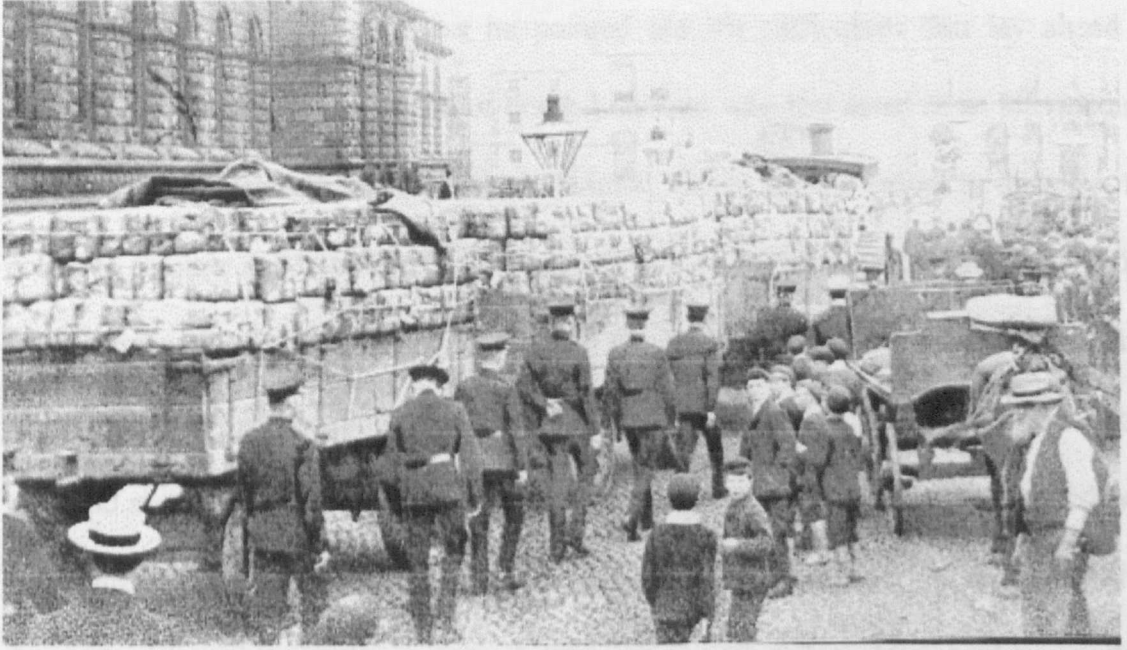


Plate Twelve: Conveying goods to the quay under police protection, July 1907. Source: *Royal Ulster Constabulary Museum*.



Plate Thirteen: District Inspector Henry Morell. The strict disciplinarian whose initial attempts to halt the agitation were thwarted. Source: *The Constabulary Gazette*, 22 December 1900.

spirits, for with pitiless clearness he pointed out the difficulties that lay ahead of them'.⁵² The last speaker, Councillor Frank Johnston, who had acted as an intermediary between the disaffected constables and Gambell, called for the crowd to disperse, the police to cogitate and later to return to duty. As *The Irish Independent* remarked, 'within half an hour all were at the post of duty in the streets or in barracks, as if instead of being crowded with sensational incident the day had been one of the most uneventful they had ever experienced'.⁵³ It was an anti-climatic end to a day that had started with such vim and vigour for the dissident R.I.C. men, but their strength was in action when the authorities were at their weakest. The dissidents' failure to capitalise on their forward momentum, their decision to rely on a petition and continue working, gave the authorities time to react.

Telegrams of support from various police stations throughout Ireland had been received by the Belfast force and although *The Northern Whig* later cast doubt on the number said to have been sent,⁵⁴ nevertheless, there were a significant number wired and the Belfast men enjoyed considerable support among the R.I.C. countrywide - a fact readily admitted by Dublin Castle.⁵⁵ Press coverage of the R.I.C. agitation in Belfast was split broadly along unionist and nationalist lines, inasmuch that the "traditional" supporters of the police in the unionist press were horrified at the R.I.C.'s behaviour.

⁵²*The Irish Independent*, 29 July 1907.

⁵³*Ibid.*

⁵⁴*NW*, 5 August 1907. For a sample of some of the telegrams see, *FJ*, 30 July 1907 or *IN*, 30 July 1907.

⁵⁵Memorandum from Under Secretary A.P. MacDonnell to Chief Secretary A. Birrell, 30 July 1907 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1908/20333).

The Northern Whig remarked, 'the police had lost their heads....In fact, it is not too far to say that it partook of the nature of mutiny', whilst *The Belfast Newsletter* commented, 'the conduct of a police force which refuses to obey orders during civil disturbances or unrest is similar to that of a regiment which mutinies on the eve of battle'.⁵⁶ *The Belfast Critic* said: 'It is significant that at the first sign of real hard work since about 1886 they rebel'.⁵⁷ All of these were agreed, however, on the point that the Belfast R.I.C. men had been overworked during the strike and there was similar agreement in the main unionist newspapers that the disaffected policemen had legitimate grievances, but they disagreed with the agitators' tactics. The London press seemed to be of the same view as their Irish unionist counterparts, thus *The Evening Standard*, whilst it castigated the Belfast men for their 'foolish manifestation of passion', was nevertheless keen to point out that it was 'easy to find some sympathy....with the causes of unrest amongst the Royal Irish Constabulary'.⁵⁸ *The Times*, which at first took the Government's line and sought to minimise the agitation, later broadly supported the men's claims emphasising that: 'Public opinion will be solidly behind the police so long as they act constitutionally and properly'.⁵⁹

Nationalist papers like *The Irish News*, rarely a supporter of the R.I.C.,⁶⁰ were in the

⁵⁶*NW*, 29 July 1907, *BNL*, 29 July 1907.

⁵⁷*The Belfast Critic*, 3 August 1907.

⁵⁸*The Evening Standard*, 1 August 1907.

⁵⁹*The Times*, 1 August 1907.

⁶⁰The R.I.C. were reluctant to contact *The Irish News* over the issue of provocative strike posters because the 'newspaper would be certain to make capital out of it'.

Memorandum from District Inspector E. Clayton to Commissioner H. O'H. Hill, 10 July

novel position of being solidly behind the Belfast men's cause, although it soon became obvious that this support was a stick with which to beat the Castle administration - a tactic they were to use frequently throughout the agitation. Other nationalist newspapers like *The Freeman's Journal* were more cautious in their advocacy for the R.I.C., but commented favourably on such matters as the voluminous telegrams of encouragement from other R.I.C. barracks.⁶¹

The constabulary's own periodical, *The Constabulary Gazette*, showed a fierce but fair measure of independence, enjoining the Belfast force 'to ask what they reasonably hope to receive, and ask the Inspector-General to back their claim'.⁶² Neville Chamberlain had done so in the past, but Antony MacDonnell was determined from the outset to crush the agitation and when Gambell recommended that 'we should grapple firmly with the whole thing',⁶³ it was plainly music to MacDonnell's ears. Although Gambell stated that 'even the higher ranks have....some sympathy with the movement', this cut little ice with MacDonnell who favoured 'punitive action'.⁶⁴ In a lengthy telegram to the Chief Secretary, MacDonnell warned:

it would be fatal weakness to enter into any negotiations with reference to a demand

1907 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1908/20333/15284).

⁶¹*FJ*, 29 July 1907.

⁶²*IN*, 30 July 1907. *The Constabulary Gazette* was actually edited by a government civil servant, William Harding, and was a semi-independent Dublin-based newspaper, later a thorn in the side of the R.I.C. command.

⁶³ Telephone Message from Mr. Gambell, A.I.G., to Inspector General, 29 July 1907 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1908/20333).

⁶⁴*Ibid.* and MacDonnell's handwritten annotation on the Memorandum from Deputy Inspector General H. Considine to Inspector General N. Chamberlain, 29 July 1907 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1908/20333).

preferred in so insubordinate a spirit and at such a time of strain in Belfast. The re-establishment of discipline in the Belfast police force is a condition precedent to any consideration of any grievance that may exist, and if to this end it may be necessary to deal with 600 Belfast constables, even to the extent of suspension or dismissal this risk must be faced.⁶⁵

Nicknamed the Bengal Tiger from his time in the Indian Service, MacDonnell had told his former Chief Secretary, George Wyndham, that one of the 'objects that he held to be of primary importance....included the maintenance of order'.⁶⁶ A putative constabulary mutiny clearly did not fit that remit. Characterised as 'half policeman, half Civil Servant' by one parliamentarian, MacDonnell was a man who stood in stark contrast to the rest of Augustine Birrell's 'mild, apologetic, non-aggressive administration'.⁶⁷ MacDonnell's attitude of studied belligerence towards the Belfast agitators was an ample demonstration, if such were needed, of his views on the administration of law and order. However, from the time of his appointment in October 1902, MacDonnell made clear his aversion for the minutiae of police work and soon appeared to take an equal dislike to both Chamberlain and the R.I.C. MacDonnell quickly developed a 'coolness towards Chamberlain'⁶⁸ which was to culminate in MacDonnell recommending

⁶⁵Telegram from Under Secretary to Chief Secretary, 29 July 1907 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1908/20333).

⁶⁶L.O' Broin, *The Chief Secretary. Augustine Birrell in Ireland* (London, 1969), p.11.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, p.13 and p.218 respectively.

⁶⁸W.F. Mandle, "Sir Antony MacDonnell and Crime Branch Special", p.179.

Chamberlain's removal from office.⁶⁹ Both before and throughout the Belfast agitation Chamberlain had much call for his renowned qualities of diplomacy in dealing with MacDonnell.⁷⁰ The feeling was mutual, at least as far as the rank and file were concerned. One policeman later warned: 'Sir Antony, who was never a friend to the constabulary, will find that he is dealing with a different class of men now to the Sepoys of India'.⁷¹ MacDonnell's telegram to Birrell also recommended the reinforcement of troops in the city, Barrett's dismissal and a firm rejection of the men's petition. Birrell telegraphed his agreement, authorising MacDonnell 'to act if necessary to the fullest extent of the proposals in your long telegram'.⁷²

Neville Chamberlain and his deputy, Heffernan Considine, although initially agreeing with MacDonnell's telegram, seem to have had either second thoughts or feared the consequences of MacDonnell venting his spleen on the force, because Considine drafted 'an important memorandum' which Chamberlain thought 'it well to place before the Government without delay'.⁷³ This was an ameliorative document in which Considine admitted that:

⁶⁹ Sir Matthew Nathan's note of a conversation with MacDonnell, 27 March 1916 (Bodleian Library, Oxford, Nathan Papers, MS 469). For example, within days of MacDonnell's appointment he publicly and flatly disagreed with Chamberlain in the latter's summation of the state of the country (Handwritten annotation to Inspector General's Monthly Report for October 1902 (P.R.O.(L), C.O., 904/76), f.134.

⁷⁰ W.F. Mandle, "Sir Antony MacDonnell and Crime Branch Special", p.178.

⁷¹ *IN*, 3 August 1907. Similar remarks were made elsewhere, see *IN*, 8 August 1907.

⁷² "Message Received in Chief Secretary's Office" from Chief Secretary to Under Secretary, 29 July 1907 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1908/20333).

⁷³ Memorandum from Deputy Inspector General H. Considine to Inspector General N. Chamberlain, 29 July 1907 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1908/20333).

The situation is undoubtedly grave. In my judgement it should be met by a combination of both strength in dealing with the disciplinary aspect, and of conciliation in respect to what I am disposed to believe are demands made with some justice.⁷⁴

The document presented to the Chief Secretary was a more balanced and sympathetic picture of what led the Belfast men to agitate than that presented by MacDonnell. Further, it made clear the limits to which disciplinary action would be taken, unlike MacDonnell's extreme proposals, and it proffered hope for the malcontents if they significantly changed their tactics. This humane alternative was dismissed by MacDonnell in a tetchy handwritten annotation to the document, and the fate of the Belfast dissident policemen was sealed.

While attempts were made to discover the names of the agitators, Gambell, anticipating orders from headquarters and acting 'under instructions' from MacDonnell, ⁷⁵began to massively reinforce the military in the city. It was a measure ostensibly designed to deal 'with the situation created by the threatened police strike and for policing the city if the strike became an actual fact'. But disaffected policemen believed it was a measure intended to coerce them.⁷⁶ Perhaps it was, but whatever the true reason, Belfast was set to endure, 'the largest concentration of troops on the streets....in the

⁷⁴*Ibid.*

⁷⁵"History of Military and Police arrangements", memorandum (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1908/20333).

⁷⁶"City of Belfast. The Police Emeute in July, 1907", Crime Branch Special Intelligence Notes 1906-1914, 3/717 (N.A.I.), p.95 and *IN*, 1 August 1907.

entire period up to 1914'.⁷⁷The first of 2,550 soldiers arrived on 30 July. The following afternoon MacDonnell telegraphed Birrell to the effect that everything would be in place for a public rejection of the activists' petition on 1 August.⁷⁸

The administration's rejection was blunt: 'It is impossible for the government to entertain a petition presented under such conditions [and it was] a serious discredit to all the constables concerned'.⁷⁹ MacDonnell's threatened retribution commenced almost immediately: Barrett was dismissed, a further ten men were to follow, 203 men were informed of their transfer on 2 August, the majority of whom were to go the next day, while seventy more were later told they would be transferred. It was an immense upheaval for a force that numbered in total just under 1,000, but MacDonnell, hawkish as ever, argued that if the remainder of the dissidents who were said to have taken part in the 27 July meeting could not be identified, he would 'be driven to proposing the transfer of every Constable in Belfast who does not give his word that he did not take part in the disorder'.⁸⁰ It was a ruse of MacDonnell's that did not infringe 'the practice of British law which expressly [forbad] any man being called on to incriminate himself

⁷⁷J. Gray, *City in Revolt. James Larkin and the Belfast Dock Strike of 1907* (Belfast, 1985), p.146. By 1 August there were five battalions of infantry and one squadron of cavalry in Belfast with a sixth battalion in reserve, a total of 3,800 men.

⁷⁸Copy of telegram wired in cipher 12.22 p.m. 31 July 07 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1908/20333).

⁷⁹Government proclamation signed by Under Secretary A.P. MacDonnell, 30 July 1907 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1908/20333).

⁸⁰Confidential reply from A.P.M. to N. Chamberlain I.G., 2 August 1907 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1908/20333).

- a point which Chamberlain, plainly concerned, asked MacDonnell to consider.⁸¹

Although Birrell had not held the post of Chief Secretary for long, it seems he was fated by default, if not by design, to continue the benign neglect of the R.I.C. begun by Wyndham and which had continued under consecutive administrations. There is no doubt that MacDonnell shared the responsibility for this neglect of the force, but, if Birrell 'exuded an aura of complacency [and] allowed the R.I.C. to drift',⁸² during his stewardship, he did not share MacDonnell's extreme disciplinary proclivities. On this matter, as on many others concerning law and order, 'MacDonnell's differences with Birrell...ran deep' and 'though greatly liking the man...[Birrell remarked] it was his hard fate never to agree' [with MacDonnell].⁸³ So, reflecting Chamberlain's concerns, Birrell sought to rein in MacDonnell, hoping that 'the number will be restricted as much as is possible as these men will be a doubtful factor and may affect the feeling of their future comrades'.⁸⁴

Disaffected policemen had agreed to meet at the Custom House steps on Saturday 3 August, but the speed of the government's measures ensured that, when ex-constable Barrett began to speak, his words were heard by a crowd that consisted almost entirely of civilian strikers. Although the reaction of the large gathering was enthusiastic, the

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² W.F. Mandle, "Sir Antony MacDonnell and Crime Branch Special", p.183, A.T.Q. Stewart, *The Ulster Crisis. Resistance to Home Rule, 1912-14* (London, 1979), p.36 and N. Macready, *Annals of an Active Life* (London, 1924), p.179.

⁸³ E. O'Halpin, *Decline of the Union. British Government in Ireland 1892-1920* (London, 1987), p.87 and L. O' Brion, *The Chief Secretary*, p.24.

⁸⁴ Message received in Chief Secretary's Office, 2 August 1907(N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1908/20333).

conspicuous absence of policemen was eloquent testimony to the failure of the agitation.

According to one West Belfast Head Constable, whose district was particularly hard hit by the transfers the immediate consequences of the agitation were grim.⁸⁵ He complained to *The Northern Whig* that:

Ever since the riots of 1898 the aim of the local authorities has been to bring the men into touch with the citizens and make the force to all intents and purposes a local one. It was owing to this fact and the confidence which exists in the men that no serious collision has taken place between police and people since 1898. The deportation of 300 men undoes the work of the last ten years with the stroke of a pen.⁸⁶

The families of the dissident policemen were of course hardest hit by the speedy transfer of their men folk and there is evidence of appeals by local priests and dignitaries to halt some of the transfers, particularly where married men were concerned.⁸⁷ Whilst the majority of these appeals were turned down, some transfers were temporarily cancelled pending investigation and it is thought likely that some of these were not eventually carried out.⁸⁸

⁸⁵His district would seem to have been "B" District in West Belfast, 'and the men in that district were more deeply implicated than the men in the other districts of the City', "Belfast Labour Strikes and Riots 1907" by District Inspector E.M. Clayton, 5 October 1907, p.29 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1908/20333).

⁸⁶*NW*, 6 August 1907.

⁸⁷*IN*, 5 August 1907 or *BNI*, 5 August 1907 and for examples of this see, letters from H. Lavery, 5 August 1907 and R. Glendinning, 8 August 1907 to A.P. MacDonnell (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1908/20333).

⁸⁸*NW*, 6 August 1907 and *IN*, 17 August 1907. Also during the R.I.C. disciplinary inquiry it emerged that a bogus telegram was alleged to have been transmitted prior to 27 July stating that the meeting was an official one and therefore some men attended on that

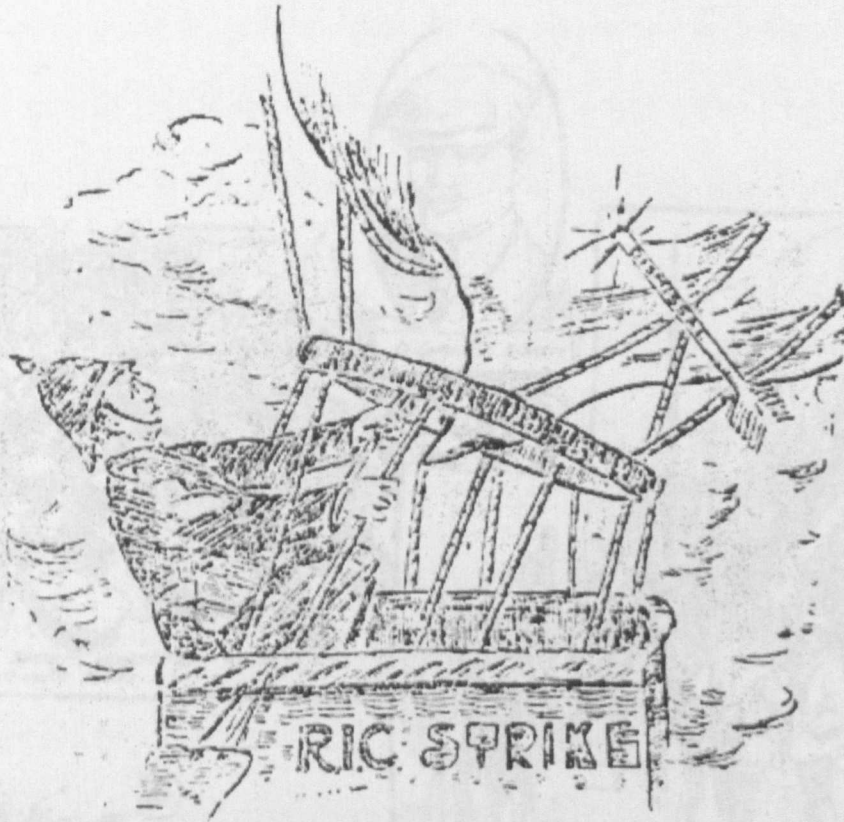


Plate Fourteen: Punctured by the arrow of dismissal, the R.I.C. agitation is over. Source: *The Northern Star*, 10 August 1907.

There were, however, efforts made by the authorities to reduce the inevitable dislocation created by the transfers. For example, the men filling the vacancies in B District were sent from other areas of the city with only thirty-seven men coming from the counties.⁸⁹ The new arrivals were carefully selected 'bearing in mind the peculiar qualifications for service in Belfast'.⁹⁰ But, *The Belfast Newsletter* hinted darkly in an editorial that the city's burglars were taking advantage of the police upheaval⁹¹ and certainly in the short term the introduction of men ignorant of the 'haunts and habits of Belfast criminals' did lead to a rise in street robberies.⁹² However, the long-term impact of the transfers should not be overstated because the transfers did not affect the detective branch in any meaningful way and *The Irish News*, despite its protestations, admitted that the police in the West District were 'exerting themselves....to secure convictions, and incidentally favourable records'.⁹³

Both *The Irish Independent* and *The Times* suggested that the replacements were not welcome in West Belfast from the outset and that the perception of being policed by strangers was a contributory factor in the riots that occurred between 10 and 12 August in that quarter of the city.⁹⁴ In light of Belfast's troubled past this may well have been

basis, *BNL*, 10 August 1907.

⁸⁹ "Belfast Labour Strikes and Riots, 1907", p.29 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1908/20333).

⁹⁰ Minute from A.P.M. to I.G., 2 August 1907 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1908/20333). Men transferring in were immediately given numbers for their uniform collars, an item of insignia denoting city service, in order for them to blend in.

⁹¹ *BNL*, 3 August 1907.

⁹² *IN*, 4 January 1908.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ *The Irish Independent*, 6 August 1907 and *The Times*, 13 August 1907.

the case, however as District Inspector Clayton remarked: 'It is much more likely that this attack on the police was entirely due to the growing hostility in Nationalist quarters to both police and military' - a view shared by *The Belfast Newsletter*.⁹⁵

These riots resulted in two deaths from military gunfire⁹⁶ and over eighty injuries and, although *The Freeman's Journal* railed against the 'provocative conduct of the military and police',⁹⁷ there is every indication that the riots were pre-planned and well organised.⁹⁸ However, as was often the case in Belfast riots, 'wild words are but too often the fruitful parents of wild and criminal deeds [and the] wild words'⁹⁹ admittedly used by one Member of Parliament, in the presence of a large meeting of Belfast strikers, the majority of whom resided in nationalist West Belfast, could not have helped the temper of the crowd overmuch.

Following representations from a local Catholic deputation, the police and military were withdrawn from the troubled area and it was patrolled by prominent Catholic citizens and clergy, together with a body calling itself the Trade Union Police,

⁹⁵"Belfast Labour Strikes and Riots" (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1908/20333), p.34 and *BNL*, 12 August 1907.

⁹⁶No doubt, with the recent memory of the nineteenth-century riots fresh in its mind, *The Constabulary Gazette*, which effectively spoke for the rank and file, saw 'the one redeeming feature of the Belfast riots, from a police standpoint, [was] that the shooting was not performed by the Royal Irish Constabulary', [Harding], *The RIC*, p.23.

⁹⁷*F.J.*, 13 August 1907.

⁹⁸"Belfast Labour Strikes and Riots, 1907", pp.33,37-40 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1908/20333), and *BNL*, 13 August 1907.

⁹⁹*The Times*, 14 August 1907. For a full account of Mr Grayson's controversial remarks, see *F.J.*, 16 August 1907.

consisting of Trade Union strike leaders and officials.¹⁰⁰ Father Convery delivered a powerful sermon supporting the police on 18 August and there was little doubt that this oration had a beneficial effect on relations between the police and people.¹⁰¹ Limited police beat patrols began on 16 August and full beat duties resumed on 17 September.

In the immediate aftermath of the agitation a flurry of reports circulated between Chamberlain, Gambell, Assistant Under Secretary Davis and MacDonnell, primarily, it would seem, with the objective of assigning or avoiding blame. The first of these significant reports¹⁰² was an attempt by MacDonnell to answer the searching questions raised in Parliament about the highly questionable method by which troops were introduced into Belfast without the Lord Mayor's initial requisition. Gambell admitted that: 'All through these proceedings from first to last it was I who moved as regards the troops and not the Lord Mayor'.¹⁰³ Although, perhaps fearing that he might be made a scapegoat, he added: 'Even before I applied for troops on Monday the 29th, a message reached me from Head Quarters telling me to consider the question of troops in the city'.

¹⁰⁴The issue was resolved by obfuscation in Parliament and elsewhere ¹⁰⁵ The truth,

¹⁰⁰*IJ*, 14 August 1907.

¹⁰¹*NW*, 19 August 1907 and Telegram from Assistant Inspector General Gamble to Inspector General, 19 August, 1907 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1908/20333/18410).

¹⁰²Memorandum on History of Military and Police arrangements (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1908/20333).

¹⁰³Transcribed telephone conversations between H.I.C. (Hefferman Considine) and Gambell, 7 August 1907, submitted to Under Secretary (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1908/20333, Number 64 and 65).

¹⁰⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵Belfast Labour Strikes and Riots, p.27 and Minute from A. Birrell to Under Secretary, 2 June 1908 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1908/20333).

however, later emerged in a Select Committee report when MacDonnell admitted that Dublin Castle acted ‘independently altogether of the municipal authorities in Belfast’.¹⁰⁶

Three further reports followed in which the Assistant Under Secretary, Under Secretary and Inspector General examined the causes of the police insubordination, aired their views and made recommendations to their respective superiors.¹⁰⁷

Unsurprisingly perhaps, MacDonnell’s remarks were the most trenchant, and a summation of them bears quotation here:

In my opinion no useful purpose would be served by an enquiry [which] would do more harm than good. The causes of the outbreak....[were] 1. dissatisfaction as regards pay. 2. Harassing work in connection with the Strike whereby the men were over-strained. 3. Effect on over-wrought men of the appeals addressed to them by Strike leaders. 4. Slackness on the part of the non-commissioned officers from Head Constables downwards. 5. Relaxation of discipline owing to the special peculiarities of City service. 6. Ignorance of the District Inspectors and the Commissioner of Police of the state of feeling among rank and file.¹⁰⁸

MacDonnell, dealing with each point in turn, believed that point one was a difficult

¹⁰⁶*Report of the Select Committee on Employment of Military in Cases of Disturbance*, 1908, 236, vii, par. 513.

¹⁰⁷Assistant Under Secretary to Under Secretary, 5 September 1907; Under Secretary to Chief Secretary, 8 September 1907 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1908/20333/21891), *The recent indiscipline of certain members of the Royal Irish Constabulary in Belfast* by N. Chamberlain, Inspector General, 14 September, 1907 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1908/20333).

¹⁰⁸Under Secretary to Chief Secretary, 8 September 1907 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1908/20333/21891).

and large area to tackle, but thought it could be handled in the short term by implementing the remainder of the 1901 commission proposals. Points two and three could have been mitigated in his opinion 'by closer supervision and encouragement by the officers of the force'. In terms of point four, MacDonnell believed that either the non-commissioned officers knew about the agitation and chose to do nothing, 'which argues them unfaithful', or did not know, 'which argues them ignorant and inefficient'. Judging that it was mostly the latter offence, he did however think that 'in some cases the worst interpretation can only with difficulty be avoided'. With regard to point five, he maintained that the Belfast force was 'too much of a Local Service, [and that] The Belfast Police should not be allowed to fancy that they are a body with special privileges guaranteed to them in perpetuity, or other than a section of the R.I.C. employed temporarily in the City of Belfast'. He also thought that the night duty men needed more supervision during their off duty hours, a matter which called for the Inspector General's attention. However, he saved his vitriol for point six, observing that: 'Nothing was more lamentable in this business than the ignorance of the controlling officers of the temper of their men'. Although he conceded that another District Inspector was needed 'for a city which is notoriously difficult to police'.¹⁰⁹

Antony MacDonnell's acerbic report was accepted and its recommendations became the minute that the Inspector General was requested to implement at the beginning of November. The minute can best be summarised thus:

¹⁰⁹*Ibid.*

An increase of the District Inspectors in Belfast is....approved....there should be an effective weeding out from the Belfast Force of all inefficient officers and men....there should be more frequent interchange of men between the R.I.C. stationed in Belfast and in the rest of Ireland. A steady transfer of men from Belfast to the counties would be advantageous. The term of service for an ordinary policeman in Belfast should be as a rule five or seven years....attention should be given to an examination of the existing practice as to day and night inspections. It would seem from the reports submitted that men on night duty may escape all effective attention on the part of their superior officers for a month; and the officers should be in closer touch with the men with a view to maintaining more effective discipline. Frequent and detailed inspections of the working of the Belfast Police by the I.G. or A.I.G. would seem to be desirable. His Excellency wishes you to submit, as soon as possible, a detailed statement of the matters which should be included in a Bill to carry out the recommendations of the Vincent Commission to which effect has not been given, with a careful estimate of the cost involved.¹¹⁰

As a condemnation of the officers and men of the Belfast force the minute could have had few equals, but with the backing of MacDonnell and the acquiescence of an uninvolved Birrell,¹¹¹ Chamberlain was obliged to accept it.

¹¹⁰Minute from Assistant Under Secretary I. Davis to the Inspector General, 5 November 1907 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1908/20333).

¹¹¹One contemporary remarked on 'the feebleness of Mr. Birrell's regime, the R.I.C. deteriorat[ing] from the efficient force they once had the reputation of being', Macready, *Annals of an Active Life*, p.166. There is little doubt that 'Birrell ignored police

The final section of the minute, referring to closer supervision of the force and the implementation of the findings of the 1901 commission, were greeted with derision by the editor of *The Constabulary Gazette*, who said of the former that, 'one ounce of tangible encouragement is stronger than a ton of discipline [and of the latter, it was little more than] a few paltry additions'.¹¹² Undoubtedly the *Gazette's* editor spoke for his readership because the R.I.C. began to haemorrhage. In 1906 there were forty-five resignations; these doubled the following year. As men slid into debt,¹¹³ they realised that the R.I.C. no longer constituted a good career, and resignations increased quickly and steadily thereafter. As the number of resignations mounted, the number of potential recruits fell and, whereas the R.I.C. had 721 First Class candidates ready to join in 1901, by September 1913 that figure had sunk to eleven.

At the beginning of 1914 the pay of a constable had 'remained unaltered' since 1883, that of a constable of under seven years service, (the bulk of the men said to have taken part in the 1907 agitation) 'after the deduction for barrack rent, is the same as that fixed from the 1st December 1872'¹¹⁴ and that of the Commissioner of Belfast had remained static since 1874. The 1914 Irish Police Committee in its report on R.I.C.(and Dublin Metropolitan Police) pay and allowances concluded that the constabulary had 'ceased to attract suitable recruits [and that the] number of resignations [from the R.I.C. was]

questions for most of his time in Ireland', writes O'Halpin, *Decline of the Union*, p.102.

¹¹²[Harding], *The RIC*, p.32 and p.5 respectively.

¹¹³*Royal Irish Constabulary and Dublin Metropolitan Police. Report of the Committee of Inquiry, 1914*, p.178.

¹¹⁴*Ibid*, p.2.

unduly large'.¹¹⁵ Such plain speaking and a large dose of self-interest finally prompted the government to improve the pay of both the R.I.C. and the Dublin Metropolitan Police.

District Inspector Edward Clayton in his extensive report on the strikes and riots in Belfast concluded: 'All traces of the police outbreak....speedily disappeared and except for the appearance of strange policemen in the streets, there is now no sign that anything out of the common occurred'.¹¹⁶ Can the police agitation be dismissed that easily? The men did not achieve their stated aims and, whilst the grievances remained, the experience of 1907 must have galled them. Perhaps in the higher echelons of the R.I.C. and at Dublin Castle it was easily dismissed. MacDonnell, uninterested in the policing aspects of his department and weary of arguing with Birrell at almost every juncture,¹¹⁷ certainly did not wish to reflect on the events that his own lack of insight had failed to predict. Neville Chamberlain, whose complicity in the burial of the Bourke Commission and total silence on the issue during his 1914 Committee evidence, left him vulnerable to the charge that he was more concerned about internal allegations of favouritism than the well being of the Belfast force, clearly had no desire to contemplate the events of 1907.

But others did not have the luxury of dismissing the agitation from their minds. District Inspector Kelly, like District Inspector Grene in 1886, was effectively made a

¹¹⁵*Ibid*, p.7.

¹¹⁶"Belfast Labour Strikes and Riots", p.59 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1908/20333).

¹¹⁷O'Broin, *The Chief Secretary*, p.16.

scapegoat and suffered the ignominy of an enforced transfer to a 'quiet country station....[to]....be retired as soon as he is eligible for his pension'. ¹¹⁸Sergeants Kerrigan and De Vere, believed to be 'dangerous' men by the Belfast Police Commissioner, were transferred from Belfast in the later tranche of rusticated men. Kerrigan was sent to the East Riding of Cork and De Vere to Monaghan, despite the best efforts of an Ardoyne clergyman to retain them. ¹¹⁹ Of the 26 July petition signatories, Barrett, alone was dismissed; William Shaw resigned on 16 September 1907; William Naughton later became a sergeant; John McGovern was disbanded as a constable in Clare in 1922; and John Tanner prospered, later being disbanded as a Head Constable in Belfast in 1922. ¹²⁰ Evidently Constable Fox's 'mutinous suggestions' did not cost him his job because he ended his career upon disbandment as a sergeant in County Mayo. ¹²¹

The eventual fate of these men seems to belie the notion that the 1907 agitation was a politically driven affair. Socialist rhetoric was occasionally used, ¹²² but any

¹¹⁸"The Recent Indiscipline" (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1908/20333). Michael Kelly was transferred to Aughnacloy, County Tyrone, on 1 January 1908 and was discharged on pension on 11 August 1908. This was a sad end to an unblemished career that had begun as a constable in 1867, Royal Irish Constabulary officers register 1817-1914, vols i-iii: (P.R.O.(L), H.O., 184/45-47).

¹¹⁹H. O'H. Hill to Neville Chamberlain, 18 and 23 November 1907 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1908/20333/25609D), sergeant's records from Royal Irish Constabulary Personnel Register (P.R.O.(L), H.O., 184/1-48) and Augustine Birrell from Rev. Malachy Gavin C.P., 14 November 1907 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1908/20333/25632).

¹²⁰Royal Irish Constabulary Personnel Register (P.R.O.(L), H.O., 184/1-48).

¹²¹The Recent Indiscipline (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1908/20333).

¹²²Barrett was politically active and after a lifelong interest in politics he was enshrined in Moscow's Hall of Martyrs (J. Gray, *City in Revolt*, p.231.) but his case was not typical. Similarly the anonymous "Willing to Strike" frequently used socialist rhetoric in his letters to the newspaper - see *IN*, 22 July 1907 as an example - but he did not appear

connection between the policemen and trade union men was simply one of tandem aims: to secure negotiating “machinery”, which would facilitate regular increases in pay and better working conditions commensurate with their status and the economic climate. To argue otherwise would be to neglect two salient points: there is no evidence to suggest that the agitation was politically based; and if the R.I.C. had suspected this, would it really have allowed, by its policy of punishment transfer, the distribution of over 200 political activists to every city and country station in Ireland?

The Belfast police agitation of 1907 had an air of inevitability about it. Grievances over pay and working conditions had dogged the force for a number of years and this was clearly more keenly felt in Belfast after the shelving of the Bourke commission. The knowledge that this commission was conducted and then its findings kept secret, must have had detrimental implications for local police morale. In a wider sense, the government-enforced reductions in the overall size of the R.I.C. between 1903 and 1905 and the closure of some stations meant that the opportunities of promotion for the rank-and-file were severely curtailed. The overall crime rate in the year leading up to the R.I.C. protest was the highest since 1893.¹²³ The Peace Preservation Act (Arms Act) - a touchstone piece of legislation to many senior officers - was allowed to lapse despite R.I.C. opposition.¹²⁴ All these factors must have had a negative impact on police

to typify other anonymous police correspondents and the telegrams of support are almost entirely free of political overtones.

¹²³*Judicial Statistics (Ireland), 1870-1914.*

¹²⁴Confidential Memorandum of Chief Secretary James Bryce, 27 November 1906, “Irish Councils Bill” (N.L.I., Bryce Papers, MS 11,009-11,011).

morale.

There was also a sense of growing estrangement between officers and men, particularly at the highest level. One intimate of Chamberlain's remarked that the appointment of the Inspector General and his Deputy, Heffernan Considine, 'neither of whom had [previously] been in the force....gave rise to great and well-founded dissatisfaction'.¹²⁵ This theme of estrangement forms a vein throughout the book by William Harding, *The R.I.C.. A Plea for Reform*. Published shortly after the 1907 agitation, it was a revealing work which aimed to put the constable and non-commissioned officer's grievances before the general public and in doing so to expose the poor morale of the force both in Belfast and elsewhere. It is entirely possible, but cannot be proved, that William Harding, as editor of *The Constabulary Gazette*, and his book had some hand in 'fomenting indiscipline in the force for years past'.¹²⁶ But as this complaint came from Chamberlain, and considering the content of Harding's book, that remark must be treated with a degree of scepticism.

Notwithstanding these issues of morale, 'there is plenty of evidence from this period to suggest that the men of the R.I.C. thought very highly of themselves indeed', and the sobriquet 'the finest body of men in the world'¹²⁷ was used almost *ad nauseam* of the R.I.C. by the press and the establishment. Such consistent praise perhaps gave them a

¹²⁵ S.M. Hussey, *The Reminiscences of an Irish Land Agent* (London, 1904), p.128.

¹²⁶ "The Recent Indiscipline" (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1908/20333).

¹²⁷ B.J. Griffin, "The Irish Police, 1836-1914: A Social History" (unpublished PhD. dissertation, Loyola University of Chicago, 1990) p.137 and *NW*, 24 April 1906 or *BNI*, 5 August 1907.

slightly inflated view of their own importance and therefore informed their claims for betterment. Certainly they were paid better on average than the majority of the strikers. Nevertheless, they had legitimate grievances which were recurrent and chronic. Forbidden to assemble, effectively forbidden to lobby, overworked and underpaid during the strike, it was little wonder that 'in a city containing 1,000 constables some of the more ardent spirits should have suggested extreme measures and have found a following'.¹²⁸ But it was never a strike and hardly a mutiny, instead rather a plea for reform.

¹²⁸[Harding], *The RIC*, p.4.

CHAPTER VII

THE DARK ELEVENTH HOUR

‘The dark eleventh hour
 Draws on and sees us sold
 To every evil power
 We fought against of old.
 Rebellion, rapine, hate,
 Oppression, wrong and greed
 Are loosed to rule our fate,
 By England’s act and deed’.

Rudyard Kipling, ‘Ulster’, 1912.¹

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the R.I.C. in Belfast faced challenges to law and order at a time when it was ill equipped to cope with them. Racked by chronic low morale, the town force endured a near mutiny in its own ranks and in the community at large, yet it ended the period intact. How did the Belfast constabulary fare in these years when Ulster was ablaze with threats of civil war? Could the disorder that engulfed the shipyards have been averted or were the R.I.C. merely helpless observers of an old sectarian rite? Were the Belfast police complicit in the gunrunning and drilling of the Ulster Volunteer Force (U.V.F.) or were they just unable to thwart these? Did poor pay and conditions and an ossification of the R.I.C. prevent effective responses to the troubles of the time? This chapter will to address these questions and endeavour to provide answers.

The opening salvo in what was to become known as the “Ulster Crisis” was effectively fired by the then Liberal Prime Minister, H.H. Asquith, during a speech at the Albert Hall in London on 10 December 1909. Asquith affirmed that his party’s

¹ R. Kipling, *The Works of Rudyard Kipling* (Ware, 1994), pp.232-3, see Appendix Three.

gradualist approach towards resolution of the Irish question was to be discarded and that Home Rule was the sole option for the party and his government. Following its narrow election victory of February 1910, the Liberal government effectively became reliant upon the Irish Nationalist Party vote in Parliament. The Irish Nationalists, led by John Redmond, were determined to exact a price for any support they gave to the Liberals and that *quid pro quo* was the House of Lords' veto, which had stymied the second Home Rule bill. Government, cognisant of Redmond's threat to vote with the Conservatives against the Liberals' much-vaunted budget, promised to curtail the Lords' veto power. The budget was passed with Irish support in April and the way to Irish Home Rule then seemed clear.

Rudyard Kipling, that laureate of Empire, was, like many prominent Unionists, outraged at the Liberals' Faustian pact with Redmond's party and his view that 'we perish if we yield'² was a poetical expression of the visceral hatred that most Unionists felt about the prospect of Irish Home Rule. Ulster Unionist opposition to Home Rule galvanised around the person of the Dublin barrister and Unionist MP, Sir Edward Carson, and he became the anti-Home Rule movement's most eloquent spokesman. Another general election was called in December 1910 by the government to settle protests from the Irish Unionists and the Conservatives, who believed that the government did not have the electoral mandate to carry forward constitutional reform or Home Rule. The Liberals were returned to power however, and a Parliament Act abolishing the House of Lords' veto was passed in August 1911. Home Rule legislation was mooted for introduction to Parliament in the

² Kipling, 'Ulster', *The Works of Rudyard Kipling*, p.233.

following year and most political observers believed it would become law in 1914.

The Ulster Unionist Council, a mixture of representatives from the various local Unionist associations and Grand Orange Lodges, undertook to revive the moribund Unionist Clubs which had been founded in 1893 to oppose Gladstone's second Home Rule bill. These clubs ostensibly became the democratic face of Ulster's opposition to Home Rule. However, within these engines of resistance lay components which had little truck with democratic methods. Believing the Union to be in grave peril, the Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland had issued a manifesto prior to the 1910 election, urging its members to 'use every effort to defeat them [the Liberals] at the polls' [adding more ominously] 'but you are equally bound to prepare for a struggle in this country if we should fail to carry the Elections'.³ This manifesto was followed by a circular from the Grand Secretary of the Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland, Robert Wallace, to all lodges, the significant portion being: 'I beg to forward to you a Form of Particulars as regards the members of your Lodge who, in the event of Home Rule becoming law, are willing to take active steps to resist its enforcement'.⁴

Although the R.I.C. recognised in 1913 that a readiness to use force was apparent in both documents, this may well have been a retrospective judgement. Following the first significant display of anti-Home Rule Unionist strength at Craigavon on 23 September 1911, the police noted that 'by far the greater number of men who marched in procession.... carried themselves as men who had been drilled'.⁵ Yet, in

³ Crime Branch Special: Intelligence Notes 1906-1914 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1913/3/717), p.18.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.19.

his reply to a memorandum on the alleged arming and drilling of Orangemen in Ulster, the Deputy Inspector General claimed the report only showed ‘a certain amount of restlessness [which] cannot be said to go further’, and the Under Secretary concurred, saying, ‘this does not sound very alarming’.⁶ Therefore both police and government may well have believed that these paramilitary displays were mere bluster. But behind this seemingly complacent attitude, lay the knowledge that previous government attempts to stop civilians drilling had ended in failure.⁷ Robert Wallace, had in any event discovered a loophole in the law that allowed two Justices of the Peace to give permission for drilling and similar military operations by civilians, provided they were for the purpose of maintaining the constitution of the United Kingdom. Wallace applied to the Belfast magistracy on 5 January 1912.⁸

In the matter of arms’ importation for those bent on resisting Home Rule by force, the government was hoist with its own petard. On 31 December 1906, against police and magisterial advice, the Liberals failed to renew the 1881 Peace Preservation (Ireland) Act, which allowed the authorities to restrict the importation or use of arms and ammunition.⁹ But there were alternatives to this act in the 1903 King-v-Meade case. This established a precedent in law to prevent the public discharge or display of

⁶ ‘Memorandum on the Alleged Arming and Drilling of Orangemen in Ulster’, 23 October 1911 (P.R.O. (L), C.O., 904/28/2/3243/S), f.312.

⁷ In June 1886 the Chief Secretary John Morley had attempted to have Richhill Orangemen protesting against Home Rule prosecuted for publicly drilling, but local magistrates declined to send the case forward for trial, see *The Ulster Gazette*, 19 June 1886.

⁸ A.T.Q. Stewart, *The Ulster Crisis. Resistance to Home Rule, 1912-14* (London, 1979), p.69.

⁹ Confidential Memorandum of Chief Secretary James Bryce, 27 November 1906, ‘Irish Councils Bill’ (N.L.I., Bryce Papers, MS 11,009-11,011).

firearms. Also, as the Irish law officers advised:

a supply of 45 military rifles obtained by the Master of an Orange Lodge whose members had proclaimed their intention to resist by force of arms the execution of an Act of the Legislature.... would be very strong evidence of sedition.¹⁰

Further, there was provision under the Customs Laws Consolidation Act of 1876 (39 & 40 Vict. c. 36) and the Customs and Inland Revenue Act of 1879 (42 & 43 Vict. c. 21) for a Proclamation or Order in Council to be made prohibiting the importation or exportation of arms and ammunition. Finally there was the Gun Licence Act of 1870 which could prevent the use or carriage of a firearm, but not its possession.

Therefore the law could prevent the wholesale acquisition and public carriage of arms, but what was lacking was the government's willingness to use such legislation. Because the Lord Lieutenant's power to restrict arms' importation had been removed with the lapsing of the 1881 Peace Preservation (Ireland) Act, the decision to use the remaining legislative options rested with the British government. The problem here was that the cabinet in London was totally reliant on whatever information Dublin Castle was able to give it in order to formulate a response to the Ulster unrest. But the conduit for this intelligence was the Chief Secretary, Augustine Birrell, who was woefully ill equipped to do so. In July 1912 Birrell had asked Chamberlain to alter R.I.C. intelligence priorities saying:

I have read for more than five years these reports about Secret Societies and their goings on in different parts of Ireland and have occasionally succeeded in extracting useful information from them as to the state of feeling and habits of life

¹⁰ Note by Law Officers, c.20 December 1911 (P.R.O.(L), C.O., 904/28/1), f.35.

in one or two affected areas.... I think the time has come when the same microscope should be employed in another part of Ireland, if that be possible; and information collected as to the “goings on” in parts of Ulster of Clubs and organisations which have lately been supplied with arms and are being detailed for eventualities. These “Secret Societies” are for the moment at all events of greater importance than those whose movements are recorded in these reports.¹¹

But the bald truth was that, for reasons discussed elsewhere in this work, the R.I.C. did not have the intelligence capability to feed Birrell with accurate and timely information as to the objectives and potential of the Ulster Unionists. Further, in addition to Birrell’s view that he ‘did not consider it was part of the duty of a Liberal Minister to maintain law and order’, he treated police reports as ‘rubbish’ and had a low opinion of R.I.C. senior officers.¹² What compounded these difficulties was that Birrell’s wife was suffering a debilitating illness during this period and Birrell himself admitted that he was ‘jaded.... harassed.... alarmed’ at this critical time.¹³ Also, he was the recipient of markedly differing views on the Ulster question from colleagues, such as the anti-alarmist James Dougherty, his Under Secretary, and the ultra cautious Sir David Harrel. This scarcely made for coherent government in either Dublin Castle or Whitehall and explains to a great extent the executive’s vacillatory and misjudged response to the nascent Ulster Unionist

¹¹ Augustine Birrell to Neville Chamberlain, July 1912 (P.R.O.(L), C.O., 904/13).

¹² Private conversation between Antony MacDonnell and E.S. Montague MP, 1908, quoted in E. O’ Halpin, *Decline of the Union. British Government in Ireland 1892-1920* (Dublin, 1987), pp.86-7 and W.A. Philips, *The Revolution in Ireland 1906-1923* (London, 1926), p.75.

¹³ *Hansard* 5, Volume XLI, 15 July to 7 August 1912, p.2114, Mr. Birrell.

rebellion.

Thus with a large dose of impotency and ignorance and a small measure of complacency, the R.I.C. faced one of its biggest challenges. It was merely a passive observer of the Unionist *coup de main* and relied on the Customs Service ‘to be on the alert for cases which may be suspected to contain arms’.¹⁴ Customs were to use their limited powers, under the two customs statutes mentioned above, to interrupt and seize arms shipments on such grounds as mis-description of goods imported. The first shipment detained at Leith in September 1911 under these regulations was a consignment of 200 rifles and bayonets. The consignee was fined £10 for describing the arms as “Spelter”, but as the arms had then to be released to the consignee, the proceedings were somewhat farcical. Early inquiries by the R.I.C. revealed that some weapons’ stores were already in the province from previous anti-Home Rule protests, but that ‘in nearly every household in Ulster there was a firearm of some description, either shot-gun or converted rifle, while in Belfast and the larger towns revolvers were in the possession of the working classes to a very considerable extent’.¹⁵

As the Ulster Unionists began their preparations to oppose Home Rule and as the bill was wending its way through the legislative process, tension in Belfast increased. This was nowhere more so perhaps than in the shipyards, which employed large numbers of working-class Protestants virulently antipathetic to Home Rule. As early as 1857 the shipyard workers had been ‘identified as militant partisans [in the vanguard of Protestant rioters] and in 1871 such were the number of Orangemen

¹⁴ Importation of Arms, 13 July 1912 (P.R.O.(L), C.O., 904/28/2), f.301.

¹⁵ Crime Branch Special Intelligence Notes 1906-1914 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1913/3/717), p.22.

present at the yard,¹⁶ that the seventh Belfast district Orange lodge was exclusively comprised of Queen's Island workers, During the 1886 riots the Islandmen were said to have been instrumental in mobilising all sections of the Protestant population and thereafter this Belfast 'labour aristocracy' [assumed] 'the role of permanent aggressive vigilance on behalf of the entire Protestant population'.¹⁷ Little had changed by 1900.

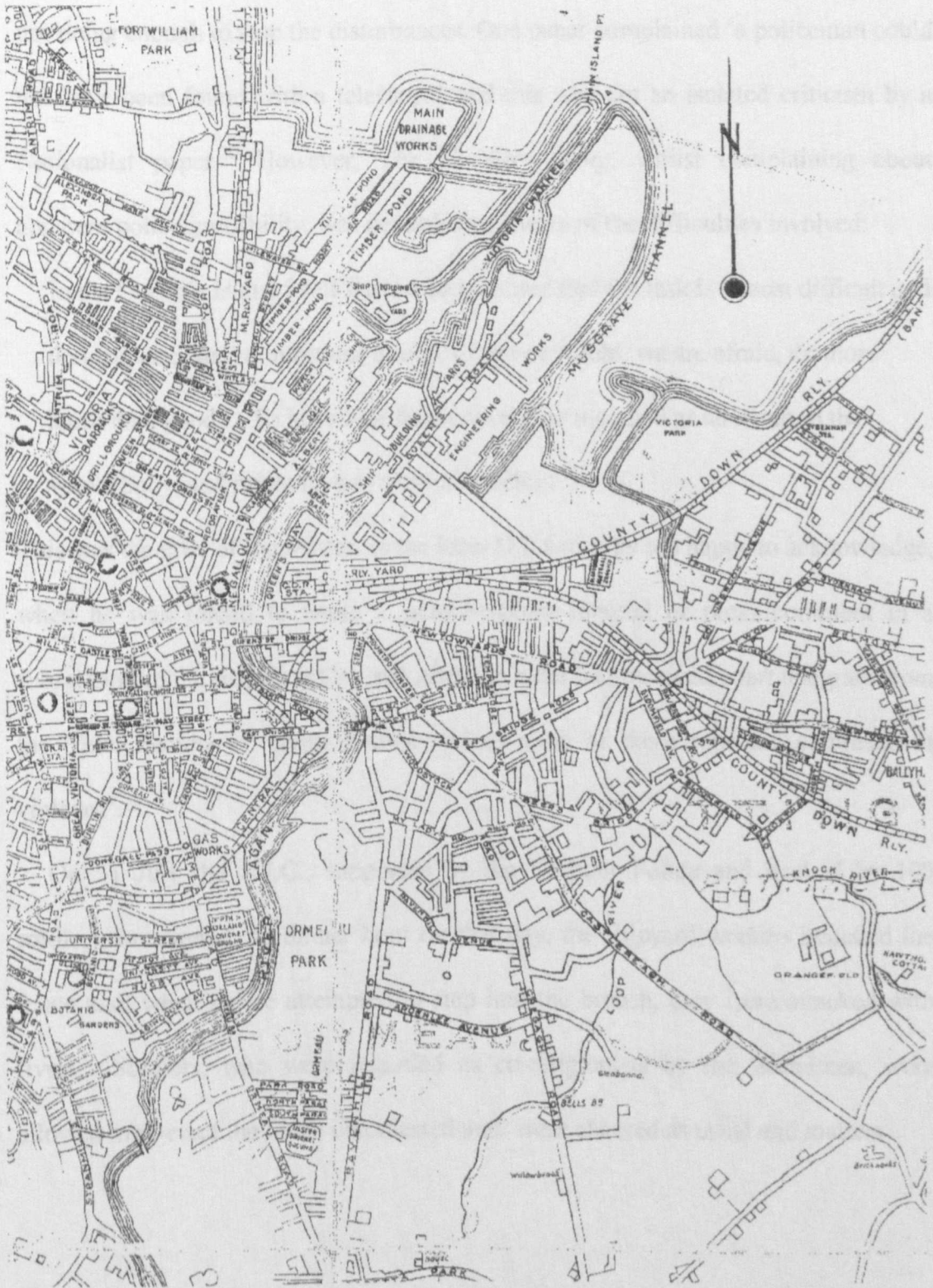
On 26 July 1901 some 300 Queen's Islandmen attacked a number of Catholic navigators working in the Musgrave Channel, forcing them to flee by boat. *The Freeman's Journal* described it as a 'wild scene of sectarian savagery' and *The Irish News* believed the assaults to be the work of 'Orange fanatics [and] criminals of a very deep dye'.¹⁸ *The Belfast Newsletter* was largely silent on the affair, concentrating on a simultaneous assault on an English commercial traveller by some shipyard workers who mistook him for an *Irish News* reporter.¹⁹ The Harbour Commissioners erected a palisade between the Channel and the shipyards, but intimidation and assaults on Catholic workers continued over the next four days. Although the R.I.C. were not legally bound to intervene on this private property, (which was in any case patrolled by the Harbour Police), unless a felony had been or was about to be committed, they were nevertheless severely censured in the press for

¹⁶ H. Patterson, *Class Conflict and Sectarianism. The Protestant Working Class and the Belfast Labour Movement 1868-1920* (Belfast, 1980), p.xvii and I. Budge and C. O'Leary, *Belfast: Approach to Crisis: A Study of Belfast Politics 1613-1970* (London, 1973), p.94.

¹⁷ P. Gibbon, *The Origins of Ulster Unionism. The Formation of Popular Protestant Politics and Ideology in Nineteenth-Century Ireland* (Manchester, 1975), pp. 77-8 and 83.

¹⁸ *FJ*, 27 July 1901 and *IN*, 29 July 1901.

¹⁹ *BNL*, 27 July 1901.



Map Two: Detail of Belfast, 1911, showing the shipyard. Marcus Ward & Co. Ltd. Source: *Belfast Reference Library*.

not doing enough to stop the disturbances. One paper complained ‘a policeman could not have been found with a telescope’ and this was not an isolated criticism by a Nationalist paper.²⁰ However, *The Northern Whig*, whilst complaining about apparent police invisibility, was nevertheless aware of the difficulties involved:

In the Queen’s Island itself it must be admitted that the task is a most difficult and delicate one, and to introduce a force of police would, we are afraid, do more harm than good.... To introduce police would be regarded as an insult to the whole body, and might lead to serious mischief.²¹

This was the crux of the matter, as the local D.I. was only too happy to acknowledge, when he was forced to make a point-by-point rebuttal of press comment in a submission to the Inspector General, after the latter had received a tart telegram from the Chief Secretary ‘taking a most serious view of these repeated outbreaks of violence’.²²

On 31 July the R.I.C., supported by the Harbour Police and backed by 100 soldiers, intervened. At dinner hour on that day, the shipyard workers attacked the fence and, when police attempted to step into the breach, they were attacked with rivets. Soldiers, who were regarded as co-religionists by the Islandmen, were allowed to re-erect the fence unmolested and ‘were cheered as usual and matters

²⁰ *IN*, 31 July 1901. See also *FJ*, and *BET*, 27 July 1901, *FJ*, and *IN*, 29 July 1901.

²¹ *NW*, 31 July 1901.

²² Assaults on Catholics at Queens Island. Cuttings from local morning papers, Report by D.I. Morell to Commissioner, T. Moriarty, 31 July 1901 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1912/11935) and Immediate Telegram from Chief Secretary to Inspector General, 29 July 1901 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1912/11935).

settled down'.²³ Troops and police were present in strength until 5 August by which time the trouble had ceased. The Islandmen's reaction to the police demonstrated the 'longstanding hostility [which they felt] as a body towards the R.I.C.'. ²⁴ So great was the hostility that, when the R.I.C. had to assist in crowd control at the launch of the 'Olympic' on 20 October 1910, the Commissioner was driven to remark amazedly that it was, 'the first time the Constabulary did duty on the Queen's Island without being attacked'!²⁵

At the beginning of 1911 the first Unionist Clubs to be resuscitated were those in the shipyards and, as during the Home Rule crisis of 1886, the shipyard workers were 'a major factor' in mobilising the Protestant population of the city in support of the Unionist cause.²⁶ Unfortunately, the proximity of Orange Lodges and Unionist Clubs and the increased politicisation of the majority workforce left the Catholic minority exposed and vulnerable. The widespread perception abroad that Catholicism equated to home rule meant that in times of heightened tension Catholic co-workers were convenient targets for intimidation, attack and expulsion, and that is precisely what happened in 1912.

The precipitating factor was an attack by a party of the nationalist Ancient Order of Hibernians on a Protestant Sunday school excursion at Castledawson on 29 June

²³ 'Disturbances in Belfast, 1912', Report by T.J. Smith, Commissioner, to Inspector General Sir Neville Chamberlain, 29 August 1912, unpaginated (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1912/15601).

²⁴ Letter from Hugh O'H. Hill, late Commissioner of Belfast to Inspector General, 17 August 1912 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1912/15601).

²⁵ Inspector General and County Inspector Monthly Confidential Report, October 1910 (P.R.O.(L), C.O., 904/82), f.219.

²⁶ Patterson, *Class Conflict and Sectarianism*, p.88.

1912. On 2 July assaults on Catholic workers began in Workman and Clarke's north yard and spread to the south yard and to Harland and Wolff's yard on Queen's Island the following day. *The Irish News* described the assaults as a 'reign of terror established by the shipyard rowdies [who] were out for blood'.²⁷ The entire Catholic workforce and some Protestant socialist supporters, numbering between 2000 and 3000 men, were driven from the yards by a mixture of assaults and intimidation. Some Catholic workers tried to return to work on 4 July but were 'attacked, beaten and hunted' and later 'forcibly ejected'.²⁸ During the evening of the 4th, 8,000 men and followers from the Queen's Island Unionist Clubs took to the streets of Belfast and some thirty-eight premises, including that of *The Irish News*, were damaged in stone-throwing incidents.²⁹ On 5 July the R.I.C. Commissioner, T.J. Smith, was approached for constabulary protection by some of those who had been expelled so they could draw their pay from the yards. Smith reasoned that to send his only reserve, '200 unarmed police.... along the Queen's Road and about the shipyards, at such a juncture would be useless',³⁰ and he applied for military assistance. The G.O.C. refused until forced to cooperate by 'superior authority',³¹ but the men being paid singly in the firms' main offices eventually resolved the matter. By mutual consent the R.I.C. assumed control of policing the north portion of the river and the entire Harbour Police force patrolled the shipyards. These measures, together with an

²⁷ *IN*, 3 July 1912.

²⁸ *IN*, 4 July 1912 and *Belfast Evening News*, 4 July 1912.

²⁹ *Hansard* 5, Volume XL, 24 June to 12 July 1912, p.1453, Mr. Devlin.

³⁰ Letter from Neville Chamberlain, Inspector General, to Under Secretary, 3 September 1912 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1912/33262/59512/15601).

³¹ *Ibid.*

appeal for calm from the Ulster Unionist Council,³² served to impose relative tranquillity on the yards until the holiday closure on 11 July.

However, the sally by the Queen's Islandmen had created a furore in the city. The Commissioner reported that: 'Bickering, quarrels, and assaults occurred at almost all the mills and factories; assaults were committed and windows broken. The entire police force was taxed to the utmost in dealing with these matters and preventing serious collisions between the parties'.³³ Sporadic rioting occurred on 12 and 13 July, but swift intervention by the R.I.C. prevented this from becoming serious.

The shipyards reopened on 22 July with a formidable force arraigned to prevent trouble. All of the Harbour Police were on patrol within the yards and the R.I.C. and army were outside in reserve. But trouble did not flare up until the following morning, when some Catholics sought to return to work. In the ensuing melee the Harbour Police were soon overwhelmed. The Lord Mayor requisitioned 300 soldiers and half of these together with 100 policemen were picqueted along the Queen's Road, which bisected the Queen's Island. Minor scuffles occurred. In the afternoon, much to the Commissioner's chagrin, the Army unilaterally withdrew over half of their men and, unsurprisingly, trouble occurred in their absence. The Commissioner later bitingly remarked: 'In my opinion, two [military] pickets were not sufficient to prevent assaults on a densely crowded road a mile long'.³⁴

The following day the military supplied three picquets to support the 100-strong

³² *BNL*, 12 July 1912.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ 'Disturbances in Belfast, 1912', Report by T.J. Smith, Commissioner, to Inspector General Sir Neville Chamberlain, 29 August 1912 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1912/15601).

R.I.C. contingent, but again these were later removed without consideration to police needs. The R.I.C., feeling exposed on the Queen's Road, were compelled to withdraw, and later two attacks occurred on Catholic workers. When assaults occurred on the R.I.C. they were savage, and *The Belfast Newsletter* spoke of 'personal antipathy'.³⁵ On 25 July the Army refused to supply picquets, arguing their irrelevance in preventing assaults, and the constabulary was then not sent to the Queen's Road that day. The Harbour Police attempted to patrol the trouble spots but five attacks occurred. Amid howls of criticism in Parliament over his decision to withdraw from the Queen's Road,³⁶ the Commissioner wrote to the G.O.C. tactfully arguing the case for better military cooperation.³⁷ *The Irish News* had contributed to that criticism and had launched a withering personal attack on Smith's conduct, arguing that

the police are powerless while Mr Commissioner Smith is useless.... he has dealt with a serious problem during the past month in the hesitant, nerveless, shifty, helpless fashion of a man who has no policy except flight.... [conducting] unmasterly retreats from the forces of outrage and crime.³⁸

Not surprisingly perhaps, the expelled workers agreed, and during a meeting at St. Mary's Hall on the 26th, a delegation of the men resolved to protest at the 'weakness

³⁵ *BNI*, 25 July 1912.

³⁶ *Hansard* 5, Volume XLI, 15 July to 7 August 1912, pp.1637 and 1639, Mr. Devlin.

³⁷ Disturbances in Belfast, 1912, Report by T.J. Smith, Commissioner to Inspector General Sir Neville Chamberlain, 29 August 1912 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1912/15601).

³⁸ *IN*, 26 July 1912.

displayed by the Commissioner throughout the entire period of disorder'.³⁹

Birrell was forced to defend Smith, but admitted that 'great dissatisfaction exists with the measures hitherto taken for the maintenance of order in the city and for the protection of workers'.⁴⁰ Birrell confessed that 'the normal police force in Belfast [was] inadequate to deal with such a situation', but added that Smith was 'now.... properly reinforced by police and by the military'.⁴¹ From 27 July to 10 August, the Army supplied the minimum that Smith required and these, together with the 'very welcome'⁴² police reinforcements, seemed to impose a measure of quietude on the shipyards.

As a result of the shipyard disturbances ordinary policemen felt that they had 'come in for a lot of unkind criticism'. One remarked: 'no matter how impartially we act, we will get blamed'.⁴³ No doubt, privately, the senior echelons of the R.I.C. felt the same. Yet, rather than utter what was really no more than a truism of policing in Belfast, the commanders set about apportioning blame. In a sixteen-page report, the Commissioner detailed the past history of Belfast riots which required army support and made clear the lack of cooperation afforded him by the military in 1912.⁴⁴ The document was not, as might be expected, a mere apologia for R.I.C. failings, but a cogently argued appeal for the rapid deployment of numerically strong military units

³⁹ *IN*, 27 July 1912.

⁴⁰ *Hansard 5*, Volume XLI, 15 July to 7 August 1912, p.1637, Mr. Birrell.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp.1856 and 1858, Mr. Birrell.

⁴² *The Royal Irish Constabulary Magazine*, i, 11 (September, 1912), p.354.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, and quoted from *The Royal Irish Constabulary Magazine* (August 1912) in *Ulsterview*, iv, 3 (August 1968), p.63.

⁴⁴ 'Disturbances in Belfast, 1912', Report by T.J. Smith, Commissioner to Inspector General Sir Neville Chamberlain, 29 August 1912 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1912/15601).

in support of the R.I.C. from the very outset of trouble. Emphasising the fact that armed policing in the city was very much a last resort by this time, Smith opined: 'Personally, I do not think the police should use their arms as long as military are available for the purpose'. He made it obvious that the army should be more diligent and ensure that 'the City should not be left without an adequate number of troops'.⁴⁵

Neville Chamberlain wholeheartedly agreed with his subordinate and prepared a report of his own, to which he appended the views of the five previous Belfast commissioners', plus Sir Andrew Reed - all of whom backed Smith.⁴⁶ He also attached a report by the Deputy Inspector General, W.A. O'Connell, who had made an inquiry into the shipyard disturbances and whose views were unambiguous:

The present conditions do not permit of effective police work. Three military picquets are not sufficient for such a distance. The Constabulary are themselves distinctly unpopular in that quarter and would at once be very roughly handled if isolated or sent out in small parties unsupported. Having regard to what took place in former years the employment of country police would be a signal for a general outbreak. The city police are not available in sufficient numbers. There is therefore nothing left but to fall back on the assistance of the military and the more fully and heartily this assistance is given the less will be the real trouble, and shorter will be the crisis.⁴⁷

Government embarrassment over the shipyard disturbances had been almost

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Letter from Neville Chamberlain, Inspector General, to Under Secretary, 3 September 1912 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1912/33262/59512/15601).

⁴⁷ Copy of Letter from W.A. O'Connell D.I.G., to Under Secretary, 29 July 1912 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1912/15601).

tangible and the executive were left in no doubt by police reports that responsibility for the imperfect policing of the shipyard troubles lay with a tardy and unwilling military. As early as 29 January, the Lord Mayor, R.J. McMordie, had reminded the G.O.C. that the failure to deploy troops in a timely fashion in 1907 had caused 'serious loss to the trade of the city' [and that the] 'feeling is vastly more acute, and it embraces a far larger proportion of the community than has been the case at any time in the past'.⁴⁸ However, if persuading the military into performing their Belfast duties with more alacrity was not an unobtainable objective for government, trying to persuade the Treasury to properly fund the city force probably was. During the height of the shipyard troubles Birrell was forced to admit that 'Belfast is, in the opinion of many people, inadequately policed even in normal times, and I am not prepared to say that is not the case'.⁴⁹ That public admission of failure led to the permanent augmentation of the Belfast R.I.C. between the end of July and September by 200 men, but despite Chamberlain's persuasive and detailed arguments, that was the extent of the Treasury's largesse.⁵⁰

Could the disorder that engulfed the shipyards have been averted by the R.I.C.? Almost certainly not. Without military support the constabulary believed themselves helpless unless they had recourse to their own firearms, the use of which, by

⁴⁸ Letter from R.J. McMordie, Lord Mayor to Brigadier General Count Gleichen K.C.V.O., Commanding Belfast District, 29 January 1912 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1912/11935).

⁴⁹ *Hansard* 5, Volume XLI, 15 July to 7 August 1912, p.2115, Mr. Birrell.

⁵⁰ Letter from Neville Chamberlain, Inspector General, to Under Secretary, 3 September 1912 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1912/33262/59512/15601).

common consent was ‘madness’.⁵¹ There were real tactical difficulties in deploying unarmed policemen in an area where their hated presence was an invitation to attack and where:

The ships moored alongside the quay [were].... fully within range of the bolts, nuts, and other missiles, with which the men working on these boats attack in times of disturbances the police who are sent to Queen’s Road to maintain the peace and prevent assaults.⁵²

The ground was favourable to the assailants who, after attacking police from a safe distance, could melt away into ships, slips, gantries and cranes, thus making baton charges and arrests impossible. The use of plain-clothes men was an option tried during the riots, but these men ‘were recognised and told if they came back they would be put in the docks’.⁵³ As T.J. Smith remarked: ‘Even in ordinary times, a policeman in uniform has missiles frequently thrown at him if he has to go down about the Queen’s Road’.⁵⁴ The Harbour Police were recruited from Belfast and were therefore relatively popular with the shipyard workers, but as they were just seventy strong and only equipped with staves, they were soon overwhelmed when workers clashed with each other. *The Northern Whig* suggested that ‘further

⁵¹ ‘Disturbances in Belfast’, Report by County Inspector Clayton, 19 August 1912 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1912/58916/33262).

⁵² ‘General Description of Shipyards’, Report by T.J. Smith, Commissioner to Inspector General Sir Neville Chamberlain, 29 August 1912 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1912/15601).

⁵³ ‘Disturbances in Belfast, 1912’, Report by T.J. Smith, Commissioner to Inspector General Sir Neville Chamberlain, 29 August 1912 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1912/15601).

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

organisation for the preservation of peace is required inside the works'.⁵⁵ The Chief Secretary had advocated such a move in 1901.⁵⁶ However, as efforts to enforce peace in the works were predicated on the cooperation of all the foremen and gangers, who were often active participants in the mayhem, the imposition of internal discipline was not viable as a means of control. The only real answer was for shipyard owners to close the works at the first sign of serious trouble; a solution which, on most occasions, they were reluctant to institute. Predictably, the numbers of men returned for trial in the shipyard disturbances were paltry and of these most were later acquitted by sympathetic jurors, despite the judge's instructions to convict.⁵⁷

On 14 September a dangerous riot occurred at a football match between the Catholic supporters of Belfast Celtic and the Protestant supporters of the Linfield club, which caused at least sixty casualties amongst the protagonists. One policeman wearily remarked that: 'The Northern Capital has always testified to the truth of the saying that "history repeats itself"'.⁵⁸ Clashes had frequently occurred at matches, the last most serious being on 30 April 1898. But this latest riot spawned 'friction at the foundries, shipyards and some of the mills', [and the police observed] 'arms are being very frequently carried about at the moment'.⁵⁹ After about three days the situation became calm.

⁵⁵ *NW*, 26 July 1912.

⁵⁶ Immediate Telegram from Chief Secretary to Inspector General, 29 July 1901(N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1912/11935).

⁵⁷ Inspector General and County Inspector Monthly Confidential Report, April 1913 (P.R.O.(L), C.O., 904/89), f.410.

⁵⁸ *The Royal Irish Constabulary Magazine*, i. 11 (September 1912), p.354.

⁵⁹ Inspector General and County Inspector Monthly Confidential Report, September 1912 (P.R.O.(L), C.O., 904/88), ff.39-40.

At the end of August 1911 the Under Secretary James Dougherty told Neville Chamberlain that what was required from him in the matter of the Unionist arming and drilling was not ‘impressions or hearsay, but facts’.⁶⁰ Yet by the end of 1912 those facts were still in very short supply. Whilst the police could verify that some 216 drill sessions had taken place in Ulster⁶¹ - a relatively easy task-gathering pre-emptive intelligence was an altogether different issue. One historian has commented that ‘no serious effort was made by the Irish authorities even to make a systematic appraisal of the opposition’s strength, let alone to spy on or to penetrate its leadership’.⁶² This is largely true. However, the R.I.C. did have an informant codenamed “Fred” and another unnamed source, both of whom were alleged to have a high degree of access, but judging by subsequent events, whether by design or default, neither man produced high-grade intelligence.⁶³ By the beginning of 1913 Belfast’s Detective District Inspector, J. Culling, reported that ‘there is no doubt there is a falling off at present in the sale of arms in Belfast as nearly every man on both sides possesses one’.⁶⁴ The Commissioner lamely added: ‘there are many

⁶⁰ Secret letter from J.B.D. to I.G., 24 August 1911 (P.R.O.(L), C.O., 904/28/2), ff.324-5.

⁶¹ Crime Branch Special: Intelligence Notes 1906-1914 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1913/3/717), p.22.

⁶² E. O’Halpin, *Decline of the Union. British Government in Ireland 1892-1920* (Dublin, 1987), p.101.

⁶³ Dublin Castle Records, 24 January and 23 July 1913 (P.R.O.(L), C.O., 904/27/2 Part 1), f.345 and f.296 respectively, and Inspector General and County Inspector Monthly Confidential Report, May and June 1913 (P.R.O.(L), C.O., 904/90), f.10 and f.226.

⁶⁴ ‘Importation and Sale of Arms by J. Murray, Cycle Agent, 27 Cawnpore Street and Messrs Adje and Murphy, Pawnbroker, 97 Peter’s Hill’, Dublin Castle Records, 19 January 1913 (P.R.O.(L), C.O., 904/28/2), f.301.

revolvers in the hands of persons who ought not to have them in the city’!⁶⁵ Belfast was indeed awash with legally-held arms, particularly revolvers, as a consequence of which, these weapons were used with gay abandon at celebrations on New Year’s Eve 1912 and in day-to-day disputes.⁶⁶

During December 1912 it was decided by the Ulster Unionist Council to combine all of Ulster’s quasi-military volunteers into one cohesive formation, to be known as the Ulster Volunteer Force (U.V.F.). It was to be 100,000 strong, including a 2,000 strong police force. The scattered units which had been drilling, marching and practising signalling and musketry throughout 1912 were now to be ready to fight against Home Rule and defend the Provisional Government of Ulster if Home Rule became a reality. The announcement of the U.V.F.’s establishment in January 1913 set the R.I.C. in Belfast scurrying about for information, but, judging by a secret report issued that month, their efforts were singularly unsuccessful.⁶⁷ The document, which had been compiled by a Detective Acting Sergeant, exemplified the state of the R.I.C. intelligence in the city and was as inaccurate as it was misleading. Whilst prefacing his report with the palliative observation, ‘it is very difficult to get reliable information’, the writer asserts that ‘the response to this appeal in Belfast is said to be disappointing’ ‘I do not think it is intended to either arm the men with rifles or to have the body organised in a military or semi-military fashion.... their duties are to

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *The Royal Irish Constabulary Magazine*, ii, 4 (February 1913), p.125 and *The Royal Irish Constabulary Magazine*, ii, 8 (June 1913), p.266.

⁶⁷ ‘Proposed Ulster Volunteer Force’, Dublin Castle Records, 20 January 1913 (P.R.O.(L), C.O., 904/27/2 Part 1/4161/S). ff.364-6.

be of a peaceable nature'.⁶⁸ Luckily for the reputation of the Belfast detective department, the Acting Sergeant's view did not prevail and the D.I., J. Culling, decided that the 'movement must be carefully watched by the police as it may develop into something serious' [adding] 'many ex soldiers will join it'.⁶⁹

To be fair to the Acting Sergeant, military matters of import within the U.V.F. were tightly controlled from its inception by a small coterie of ex-military officers who knew the value of secure communications and 'the greatest secrecy [was] observed in its management'.⁷⁰ The Old Town Hall, which had been the centre of political resistance to Home Rule since December 1911, became the headquarters of the Belfast regiments of the U.V.F. - soon to be the strongest component of the organisation. Within that hall, U.V.F. signallers, both men and women, developed an intelligence cell which over the next two years cracked the Government cipher. Through interception of all of the official telegrams by sympathisers within the Post Office, the U.V.F. were able to read all R.I.C. secret messages.⁷¹

Although it was known by the R.I.C. that some 900 rifles had found their way to Belfast during 1912, 'no trace of rifles in large quantities [could] be found in the City' by February 1913.⁷² In March, concern about the potential wholesale arming of the U.V.F. would seem to have impelled Neville Chamberlain to remind government

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ 'Ulster Volunteer Force Movement in Belfast', Dublin Castle Records, 24 January 1913 (P.R.O.(L), C.O., 904/27/2, Part 1/302), f.341.

⁷⁰ Inspector General and County Inspector Monthly Confidential Report, June 1913 (P.R.O.(L), C.O., 904/90), f.224.

⁷¹ From the diaries of Lady Spender, one of the U.V.F. decoders, quoted in Stewart, *The Ulster Crisis*, pp.87, 152 and 160.

⁷² Inspector General and County Inspector Monthly Confidential Report, February and April 1913 (P.R.O.(L), C.O., 904/89), f.222 and f.580.

of the impotence of the R.I.C. in this regard:

It will be nearly impossible for the police at Irish ports to detect importation of arms, if skilfully carried out by trustworthy agents, because, since the repeal of the Peace Preservation Act, they are powerless to open or detain suspected boxes.⁷³

However, as Birrell later admitted: 'I have no sort of confidence in Neville Chamberlain-his judgement is nil'.⁷⁴ Therefore Chamberlain's prescient reminder of police difficulties undoubtedly fell on deaf ears. But Chamberlain's missive was timely: in May 1913, although the U.V.F. were 'not yet fully organized [information] confidentially obtained' showed that the Ulster Unionist Council were actively considering mass imports of arms.⁷⁵ In June, Customs enjoyed a modicum of success when 600 rifles were seized at Belfast Dock, 'labelled "Electric Plant"'.⁷⁶ At this point there were twenty-six Unionist Clubs in the City with a total membership of 16,628 and 20,000 U.V.F. volunteers.⁷⁷ In a bleak appraisal of the situation in July, the Commissioner wrote in his monthly report:

No doubt there are at least 3,000 rifles and ammunition while almost every man and boy has a pistol or revolver of some kind. The game may be bluff on the part

⁷³ Inspector General and County Inspector Monthly Confidential Report, March 1913 (P.R.O.(L), C.O., 904/89), f.382.

⁷⁴ Letter from Augustine Birrell to Under Secretary Matthew Nathan, 10 November 1914, Bodleian Library, Oxford, Nathan Papers, MS 449, ff.27-8.

⁷⁵ Inspector General and County Inspector Monthly Confidential Report, May 1913 (P.R.O.(L), C.O., 904/90), ff.10-11.

⁷⁶ Inspector General and County Inspector Monthly Confidential Report, June 1913 (P.R.O.(L), C.O., 904/90), ff.212-3.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, f.223 and Crime Branch Special: Intelligence Notes 1906-1914 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1913/3/717), p.26.

of the leaders but it is impossible to doubt the fanaticism and determination of the rank and file..... My own opinion is that almost the entire protestant population of Belfast are determined in their opposition to Home Rule....The men have been trained and on the whole the position of affairs has become much more serious, the general tendency being to abandon constitutional methods.⁷⁸

Quoting liberally from the above comments and those of other County Inspectors, Chamberlain warned the government 'that the situation is rapidly becoming a very grave case, so far as the maintenance of law and order in Ulster is concerned'.⁷⁹ Dougherty sent Chamberlain's report to Birrell with a covering letter in which he wrote:

In reading these reports it is perhaps necessary to remember that these officers are more closely associated with Unionist politicians and with the better classes of society in Ulster than they are with the masses. They are perhaps a little inclined to over-rate the importance of the drilling and other military operations which have been carried on and the readiness of the Protestant population to resist in the field the establishment of a Home Rule Government.⁸⁰

Almost confounding Dougherty's supineness, the Belfast Division of the U.V.F. paraded at the Agricultural Show Grounds, Balmoral, on 27 September under the command of Lt.-General Sir George Richardson. Inspected by Sir Edward Carson,

⁷⁸ Inspector General and County Inspector Monthly Confidential Report, July 1913 (P.R.O.(L), C.O., 904/90), f.465.

⁷⁹ 'Secret Report on the Condition of Ulster' from Neville Chamberlain, Colonel. Inspector General to Under Secretary, Dublin Castle Records, 26 August 1913 (P.R.O.(L), C.O., 904/27/3), f.633.

⁸⁰ 'Ulster Movement Against Home Rule', Letter from J.B.D. to Chief Secretary, Dublin Castle Records, 23 September 1913 (P.R.O.(L), C.O., 904/27/3/4623), f.625.

four regiments, a signalling and despatch riding corps, complete with medical support and a band, assembled on the day, in total some 10,390 men and women.⁸¹

The organisation of the parade was meticulous and for an body of which the police had only 'hearsay knowledge', it was affirmation, if such were needed, of the extent of the R.I.C.'s intelligence failure.⁸²

By the following month, the number of Unionist Clubs in the city had risen to twenty-eight, at least one of which was receiving company drill instruction under an ex-R.I.C. Sergeant, Sydney Reid.⁸³ On the issue of arms the Commissioner remarked:

There is no doubt that there is great activity in the importation and distribution of arms. I do not believe that there has been any general issue to Unionist Clubs, but they are being distributed to trustworthy agents throughout the City and country, so as to be immediately available. The rank and file of the Unionist Clubs do not know where they are stored - such information being confined to the heads of the organisation and to their agents.⁸⁴

Despite Smith's reports of increased U.V.F. recruitment and an upsurge in the importation arms and ammunition, his superiors urged caution. In a memorandum dated 14 November 1913, Deputy Inspector General Connell made clear the

⁸¹ 'Ulster Volunteer Force (Belfast Division)', Dublin Castle Records, 22 September 1913 (P.R.O.(L), C.O., 904/27/2/Part II), ff.497-8, ff.504-5 and Inspector General and County Inspector Monthly Confidential Report, September 1913 (P.R.O.(L), C.O., 904/91), f.37.

⁸² Inspector General and County Inspector Monthly Confidential Report, June 1913 (P.R.O.(L), C.O., 904/90), f.212.

⁸³ Inspector General and County Inspector Monthly Confidential Report, October 1913 (P.R.O.(L), C.O., 904/91), f.236.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, f.240.

concerns:

the Inspector General wishes that it should be stated in every report dealing with such matters, the grounds on which arms etc. are mentioned. If the arms etc. are actually seen, examined, or counted by the police, it should be so stated, and if the arms are not actually seen by the police, the reasons why such consignments are believed to contain arms should be fully given. It is possible that some consignments may be bogus, with the intention of humbugging the police, hence great carefulness is necessary. Would the Customs authorities in Belfast examine the steamer's manifests to ascertain the names of consigners of arms, in cases where you get previous advices of the coming of arms from the Liverpool police? As regards attached report of the 13th inst. on what grounds are those two cases believed to contain 18 Martini Enfield rifles?⁸⁵

This was not the first time Chamberlain had issued such a memorandum; one with similar content had been seen and signed by most Crime Branch Special officers and County Inspectors in July 1912.⁸⁶ However, whilst there was obviously a need to be as accurate as possible for evidential purposes, for another memorandum to be issued at this juncture bespoke of pedantry which perhaps only confirmed Birrell's dubious opinion of Chamberlain's judgement. It demonstrated a tremendous complacency and negligence at a time when it was blindingly obvious what was afoot. Clearly, R.I.C. senior officers at Dublin Castle should have instituted a massive reinforcement of police intelligence capabilities from the outset when the paucity of

⁸⁵ Crime Branch Special: CBS 1913 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1913/4642/S/1272J).

⁸⁶ 'Copy of an Order given to C. Inspector Holmes. Crime Special Branch', Dublin Castle Records, 16 July 1912 (P.R.O.(L), C.O., 904/28/2), f.302.

intelligence became apparent.

Plainly un-amused by this veiled reprimand, Smith replied:

I feel a certain amount of hesitation in putting facts in files which might involve my men in civil actions or other serious personal consequences. My men have tested the information as far as possible in every case and have frequently seen the arms, some of which as a matter of fact have been brought by them to my office in order that I might see them. The Belfast police are not being humbugged and modern arms and ammunition in large quantities are coming in. Customs would look up ships manifests if asked by us but I fail to see that anything would be gained and the route might be changed with the result that we would be compelled to commence getting information all over again. We have men who give us information on almost every vessel, at railway stations etc. so that what is reported can be fully borne out. In this specific case the police saw and counted the rifles.⁸⁷

Almost as if to vindicate his position, Smith later reported that there were some '850 rifles awaiting distribution' in the city and that his force were aware that 2,142 rifles, 128 revolvers, 2,651 sword bayonets with ammunition, had entered Belfast that month and similar amounts had left to be stored elsewhere.⁸⁸ He added gloomily: 'Everyone's hand is against the police and it is pretty certain that when they have knowledge of so many, a much greater quantity has come in unobserved.... things to

⁸⁷ Crime Branch Special: CBS 1913 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1913/4642/S/1318V).

⁸⁸ Inspector General and County Inspector Monthly Confidential Report, November 1913 (P.R.O.(L), C.O., 904/91), ff.447-8.

my mind, look very grave indeed'.⁸⁹

If all Unionist hands were 'against the police', they were soon to be joined by those of the Nationalist community as another private army took to the field, this to defend Home Rule and Irish nationalists in the south. On 17 November *The Freeman's Journal* reported the formation of a Provisional Committee which would organise a unit styled the Irish Volunteers 'to secure and maintain the common rights and liberties of Irishmen'.⁹⁰ On 25 November, the corps of Irish Volunteers was officially established at the Rotunda in Dublin and initially recruited 3,000 men. The decision to form the Volunteers had been taken in July by Bulmer Hobson, one of the leading members of the Irish Republican Brotherhood (I.R.B.), and its members heavily infiltrated the Irish Volunteers from the start.⁹¹ Although the I.R.B. did not constitute a majority of the Provisional Committee, their influence was out of all proportion to their representation and as a consequence the controlling committee was vehemently anti-British. It was also unfriendly towards Redmond's party, although this was a mutual hostility, given the criticism the Volunteers received from some of Redmond's lieutenants.⁹²

Members of the I.R.B. had been drilling since July and the ex-military instructors of the Volunteers appointed these men as officers. As Hobson remarked: 'The control of the I.R.B. was not apparent or suspected, but it operated very efficiently in

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, f.448 and f.450.

⁹⁰ *F.J.*, 17 November 1913.

⁹¹ B. Hobson, *Ireland Yesterday and Tomorrow* (Tralee, 1968), p.43.

⁹² See for example, *F.J.*, 17 December 1913.

practice'.⁹³ Traditionally, the R.I.C. had enjoyed a degree of success in either penetrating or getting pre-emptive intelligence on seditious Nationalist organisations, but, as we have seen, this changed in the first decade of the twentieth century. No longer could the R.I.C. gather first-grade intelligence and their efforts with regard to the Irish Volunteers were marked by the same passivity, "shadowing" or observation being their only tools. As a consequence the R.I.C. 'never got any information that mattered about what was going on [and] if there was any particular reason to evade them it was not difficult to do so'.⁹⁴ Despite the formation of a Young Republican Party in Belfast during November, the Nationalists maintained a relatively low profile in the city, although the police were aware that 'they too [were] armed - at all events with revolvers and automatic pistols'.⁹⁵

A notable increase in U.V.F. recruitment, the importation of ever-larger quantities of arms and frenzied well-publicised moves from the two private armies, finally prodded the government to act. On 4 December, the King approved the use of proclamations under the provisions of the Customs Laws Consolidation Act of 1876 and the Customs and Inland Revenue Act to forbid the importation of military weapons and ammunition into Ireland and their transport coastwise. It was a belated but positive step which by the end of December prompted the Belfast Commissioner to assert that it had 'practically stopped the further importation of arms into

⁹³ Hobson, *Ireland*, p.46.

⁹⁴ Hobson, *Ireland*, p.35.

⁹⁵ 'Precis of Information received in the Crime Special Branch during the month of November 1913' (P.R.O.(L), C.O., 904/119), f.170.

Belfast'.⁹⁶ Up until the proclamations, three Belfast firms, Adjey and Murphy, Hunter and Sons and W.D Ryall, had been importing arms into the city 'almost every day', which had then been dispersed 'as soon as possible after receipt'.⁹⁷ However, some arms had been retained in the city and by 31 December the police estimated that number to be some 7,081 arms, at least 3,300 of which were rifles. The Commissioner believed this estimate to be 'under rather than over the mark'.⁹⁸

By the year's end the sixty-strong Belfast detective department received fourteen extra men, of whom nine were assigned to Crime Special⁹⁹ in a bid by the police to improve their intelligence-gathering capabilities. Despite this move, there was no appreciable improvement in the quality of R.I.C. intelligence. For example, on 24 April 1914 Belfast police were informed that a shipment of arms was to arrive on the S.S. "Roma". The R.I.C. and Customs had only the vaguest details and were in the wrong place when the arms were unloaded. The police managed to observe twenty motor cars entering Workman and Clark's yard empty and leaving the yard 'with irregular looking loads, which were covered over with rugs, &c.'¹⁰⁰ Thereby the U.V.F. received many more rifles, ammunition and sword bayonets for the cause.

The seeming ease with which the U.V.F. continued to receive sizable arms

⁹⁶ Inspector General and County Inspector Monthly Confidential Report, December 1913 (P.R.O.(L), C.O., 904/91), f.651.

⁹⁷ 'Precis of Information received in the Crime Special Branch during the month of November 1913' (P.R.O.(L), C.O., 904/119), f.180.

⁹⁸ Crime Branch Special: Intelligence Notes 1906-1914 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1913/3/717), p.36.

⁹⁹ *The Royal Irish Constabulary Magazine*, iii, 2 (December 1913), p.46.

¹⁰⁰ 'Report by Joseph Edwards, Sergt. (54,120) (Detective Department)' Dublin Castle Records, Incorrectly dated as 4/3/14 (P.R.O.(L), C.O., 904/29/1), ff.89-91.

shipments during the first half of 1914 (the gunrunning to Larne being a spectacular example) can be attributed to poor R.I.C. pre-emptive intelligence, tight U.V.F. security and U.V.F. monitoring of police messages. But are these the only reasons? What of police complicity? In a recent work John Killen remarked: ‘Unsuccessful attempts by the RIC to locate these arms caches pointed towards open collusion with the UVF’.¹⁰¹ One ex-R.I.C. officer believed the ‘leaders of the [Home Rule] movement ought to have been brought before a competent tribunal to answer for their conduct’,¹⁰² but were his views typical of R.I.C. officers’ pro-Unionist sentiments?

Augustine Birrell thought the R.I.C. unreliable in tackling the Ulster Protestants and, in addition to having a dismal opinion of Chamberlain’s judgement, also believed him biased. In August 1913 he wrote to Asquith:

You must realize that they [R.I.C. officers] are all obviously one-sided. Sir Neville Chamberlain himself is a True Blue and the majority of the reporting officers (probably) would be themselves covenanters. Real political discernment is not a quality of the police anywhere, and you must not expect it in Ulster Protestant policemen, but they are honest fellows, not treason-mongers.¹⁰³

Birrell’s remarks were perhaps a little too sweeping, given that he was almost entirely uninterested in policing matters and such a “hands off” approach could not have made him entirely familiar with the R.I.C. Nevertheless, as we have seen in

¹⁰¹ J. Killen, *The Unkindest Cut, A Cartoon History of Ulster 1900-2000* (Belfast, 2000), p.24.

¹⁰² C.P. Crane, *Memories of a Resident Magistrate 1880-1920* (Edinburgh, 1938), p.212.

¹⁰³ Quoted in O’ Halpin, *Decline of the Union*, p.68.

Chapter II, there were questions asked about Chamberlain's moves to foster good relations with the Unionist Belfast city corporation during his early tenure as Inspector General. Perhaps Chamberlain's entreaty to his subordinates over the need to be totally sure of their arms' reports was a subtle device to delay the flow of information to government. It is a distinct possibility, but one cannot be definite with such scant evidence.

In the matter of two policemen there is at least a *prima facie* case to answer. On the 19 March 1914 the U.V.F. intercepted and decoded a message to the Belfast commissioner which seemed to suggest that the arrest of its leaders was imminent. Amidst frantic counter moves in Belfast to prevent this, one U.V.F. commander, F.P. Crozier, effectively acting as Carson's bodyguard, was tipped off by a police sergeant that Carson was not in danger.¹⁰⁴ Later, on the evening of the 20th, T.J. Smith met the officer in charge of the U.V.F.'s East Belfast Regiment, Colonel A.C.S. Chichester, during the former's routine patrol. At some stage in a conversation on the nature of the U.V.F.'s nocturnal activities, Smith showed Chichester a telegram he had received which convinced the U.V.F. commander that no widespread arrest of his leaders was planned.¹⁰⁵ Letting Chichester see a decoded secret telegram was either a thoughtless security lapse or an act of collusion. Later Lord Carson spoke very highly of Smith when he was being considered for the post of Inspector General¹⁰⁶ and this recommendation may have been indicative of an

¹⁰⁴F.P. Crozier, *Ireland for Ever* (London, 1932), p.40.

¹⁰⁵I. Colvin, *The Life of Lord Carson*, 3 vols. (Vol. 1 by Edward Marjoribanks) (London, 1934), Vol ii, pp.322-3.

¹⁰⁶Letter from Lloyd George to Bonar Law, 30 December 1919, quoted in L. W.

unhealthy closeness between Smith and the Unionist leadership. General Sir Nevile Macready 'was struck with [Smith's] hesitation.... to enforce drastic measures, should such become necessary' and concluded 'that many of the force were in their hearts, on the side of the Orangemen'.¹⁰⁷ This is not particularly surprising. After all, the resignation papers in the Patrick Walsh collection¹⁰⁸ contain ample evidence of R.I.C. men colluding with Republicans and Nationalists, so why should the force not contain men with similar pro-Unionist sympathies? When one considers Belfast's slight preponderance of Protestant officers, it is perhaps almost inevitable that whatever intelligence reached Dublin Castle from the police in the city was, as Macready suggests, 'coloured with the political or religious leanings of its source of origin'.¹⁰⁹ Ex-Sergeant Sidney Reid was not the only R.I.C. pensioner training the U.V.F. in Belfast, for there were others,¹¹⁰ and it is not beyond the bounds of credibility to suggest that many of their colleagues still in the police were in sympathy with the pensioners.

Bias and active collusion are however two distinct issues but not mutually exclusive. Whilst it is relatively easy to suggest the existence of bias in the way that Belfast policemen acted towards the U.V.F and Carsonite supporters, it is more difficult to prove that such bias manifested itself in overt acts of collusion. Although,

McBride, *The Greening of Dublin Castle. The Transformation of Bureaucratic and Judicial Personnel in Ireland, 1892-1922* (Washington, 1991), p.268.

¹⁰⁷ N. Macready, *Annals of an Active Life* (London, 1924), pp.179-80.

¹⁰⁸ Patrick Walsh Papers (1911-1936), Garda Síochána Museum and Archives, Dublin.

¹⁰⁹ Macready, *Annals*, p.190.

¹¹⁰ See for example, Inspector General and County Inspector Monthly Confidential Report, May 1914 (P.R.O.(L), C.O., 904/93), f.279.

in the context of U.V.F. gunrunning, for policemen to ‘sit on the fence and not commit themselves if possible to any pronounced action’,¹¹¹ was an act of covert, if not overt, collusion. With the exception of the cases mentioned above, evidence of R.I.C. collusion in Belfast is, understandingly perhaps, scant. It is axiomatic that for evil to triumph it is enough for good men to do nothing, but I do believe, on the balance of probability, that the turning of a “Nelsonian eye” was the extent of most acts of collusion by the city force.

If there was a “dark figure” of collusion amongst the Belfast police, perhaps it was, as Macready seems to imply, because Smith and his subordinates ‘were suffering from want of confidence in the authorities in Dublin, to whom they should have looked for support [because they believed] not without reason, that the Government would in the end be worsted by Carson’.¹¹² Certainly Smith felt impotent, as his evidence to the 1914 Commission shows,

Mr. Headlam.- And the repeal of the Peace Preservation Act has increased your difficulties?- [Smith] Yes, because we have no control over the people with arms. We cannot take them from them. Mr. Starkie.- But they can be prosecuted by the Revenue Authorities?-[Smith] Yes, but if 10/- is paid the Revenue will not prosecute. If a man pays the revenue a prosecution will not come up. I merely mention this to show that the work is likely to be worse in the future than it has been in the past, and I think there should be some special provision made for the

¹¹¹ Macready, *Annals*, pp.179-80

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p.179.

Belfast Police to render their service more attractive.¹¹³

The evidence of the Government's futile response to the increase in anarchy was clear enough, and as one Chief Secretary remarked of the R.I.C. in a former home rule crisis, 'they are not in active and spontaneous sympathy with us [and] cannot be expected to be on their mettle for a government that is disbanding them'.¹¹⁴ What was true of 1893 was also true of 1913. The constabulary in Belfast had nearly mutinied in 1907 and the matter was unresolved. The situation was now exacerbated by the proximity of Home Rule. Could men who described themselves as being in 'an apathetic state',¹¹⁵ possibly be on their mettle with the sword of Damocles once more hanging over them?

On 21 April 1910 one MP pointedly asked Birrell,

how many members of the Royal Irish Constabulary committed suicide since the passing of the last Constabulary Act fixing the pay of the police at a rate scarcely higher than it was previously, and despite the promises of generous treatment held out to them by the government subsequent to the Belfast outbreak.¹¹⁶

Birrell confirmed there were seven, but added 'there is no reason whatever for connecting any of these cases with the question of pay'.¹¹⁷ Perhaps not, but dissatisfied policemen do not make effective policemen and where would the British

¹¹³ *Royal Irish Constabulary and Dublin Metropolitan Police. Appendix to Report of the Committee of Enquiry, 1914, Containing Minutes of Evidence with Appendices, [C7637], H.C. 1914-16, xxxii, 359, p. 96.*

¹¹⁴ J. Morley, *Recollections* (London, 1917), pp.352-3.

¹¹⁵ *Belfast Police Commission 1906* (N.A.I., S.P.O. Misc. and Official Papers, 1876-1922, Parcel 6), p.39.

¹¹⁶ *Hansard 5*, Volume XVI, 21 April 1910, p.2295, Captain Craig.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid*, Mr. Birrell.

government be without its Irish praetorian guard?

Rumblings of discontent within the force continued and whereas ‘there were very few resignations from the [Belfast] force’ prior to 1912, that year saw an increase to forty-four.¹¹⁸ On 7 April 1913 Birrell was pressed again on the matter in a parliamentary question,

how many resignations from the Royal Irish Constabulary in Belfast have taken place during the last six months; and if he has any information with respect to the cause of these resignations? [and] whether, having regard to the general increase in the cost of living, he will recommend a full inquiry into the pay and conditions of service of the Royal Irish Constabulary?¹¹⁹

Birrell, whilst conceding that seventeen men had left the city, the majority to emigrate or ‘better their position’, refused to consider the issues raised, remarking ‘it is too soon to reopen the question’ of pay and conditions of service.¹²⁰ Lonsdale persisted: ‘Will the right hon. Gentleman not consider, having regard to the cost of living, that it is almost time they did get an increase?’ [to which Birrell replied], ‘almost time, but not quite’.¹²¹ A similar exchange took place on 17 April when Lonsdale asked Birrell,

if the pay of a constable after three years service in the Royal Irish Constabulary is only 21s. per week, and this figure has remained stationary for more than twenty-five years; if during that period and since the last revision of pay of this force, the

¹¹⁸ *Royal Irish Constabulary and Dublin Metropolitan Police. Appendix to Report of the Committee of Enquiry, 1914*, p.87.

¹¹⁹ *Hansard 5*, Volume LI, 7 April 1913, p.805, Sir John Lonsdale.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, Mr. Birrell.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p.806, Sir John Lonsdale and Mr. Birrell,

cost of living has risen to a very large extent; and if the Treasury have laid down any definite period of time which must elapse before the question of a further revision of pay will be considered?¹²²

Birrell agreed with the facts as stated, but once again refused to consider the issues Lonsdale raised, believing it to be 'too soon to reconsider that matter, which was dealt with in 1908'.¹²³ Fifty-five men had left the Belfast force by the end of the year.¹²⁴

If an unengaged Birrell could afford to be complacent, Sir Neville Chamberlain could not. Concerned about the haemorrhaging of his force and a lack of new recruits, he canvassed the views of all his County Inspectors in August. The response was less than encouraging and the primary reasons given were:

Inadequate pay; uncertainty of prospects owing to impending political changes; superior and better paid positions in ordinary civil life; the higher pay given to Police Forces in Great Britain and the Colonies; the improvement in the condition of the farming and labouring classes which has resulted from the operation of the Land Purchase and Labourers Acts.¹²⁵

In a broader sense, the force in Belfast, as elsewhere, had been suffering a decline in morale since the turn of the century as a result of the series of government-inspired moves (discussed in Chapter VI) and this had led to an ossification of the

¹²² *Hansard* 5, Volume LI, 17 April 1913, pp.2095-6, Sir John Lonsdale.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p.2096, Mr. Birrell.

¹²⁴ *Royal Irish Constabulary and Dublin Metropolitan Police. Appendix to Report of the Committee of Enquiry, 1914*, p.87.

¹²⁵ *Royal Irish Constabulary and Dublin Metropolitan Police. Report of the Committee of Inquiry, 1914* [C7421], H.C. 1914, xlv, 247, p.8.

constabulary. Such stagnation was now being compounded by the discouraging prospect of possible disbandment under Home Rule and the dispiriting spectacle of unrestrained private armies usurping the laws of the land with the perceived complicity of government.

Finally, impelled by the parlous state of affairs within the force, the government appointed a departmental committee to inquire into the pay and conditions of both the R.I.C. and the Dublin Metropolitan Police.¹²⁶ The three-man committee began its deliberations on 24 February 1914 and reported its conclusions on 22 May. After questioning a large number of police and civilians witnesses, the committee made recommendations with regard to the R.I.C. on sixteen separate topics covering such diverse areas as the constitution of the force, cycling allowances and marriage without leave.

On the all-important issue of pay, the committee requested the government to accept its recommendations 'with the least possible delay',¹²⁷ and the government acceded within the year. Other allowances such as subsistence allowances were increased and the constitution of the force was left unchanged, the committee feeling it was 'not the time for considering or suggesting reforms of an unsettling character'.¹²⁸ Predictably, the Treasury member of the committee differed from his colleagues on this point and attempted 'to suggest more definite economies that [could] be made by practical reform in the organisation of the Royal Irish

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ *Royal Irish Constabulary and Dublin Metropolitan Police. Report of the Committee of Inquiry*, p.7.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.27.

Constabulary'.¹²⁹ But, thankfully for the stability of the force, his appended views fell on stony ground.

Table 1: Royal Irish Constabulary Rates of Pay 1914

Rank	Service	Pay	
		Annual	£ s. d.
Head Constable Major			130 0 0
Head Constable	5 years and over		120 0 0
Head Constable	Under 5 years		109 4 0
		Weekly	£ s. d.
Sergeants	4 years and over		1 17 0
Sergeants	Under 4 years		1 15 0
Acting Sergeants			1 13 0
Constables	20 years and over		1 11 0
Constables	15 to 20 years		1 9 0
Constables	11 to 15 years		1 8 0
Constables	7 to 11 years		1 7 0
Constables	5 to 7 years		1 5 0
Constables	2 to 5 years		1 4 0
Constables	6 months to 2 years		1 3 0
Constables	Under 6 months		1 0 0

Source: *Royal Irish Constabulary and Dublin Metropolitan Police. Report of the Committee of Inquiry, 1914* [C7421], HC 1914, xliv, 247, p.19.

The Belfast Commissioner, his senior and junior District Inspectors all received considerable allowance increases and both officers and men in the city benefited from the pay reforms. Yet any fillip to morale was but a fleeting one. In July it became glaringly obvious to every policeman that the law would be sacrificed, along with policemen, on the altar of political expediency, when, in the aftermath of the Howth gunrunning incident, D.M.P. Assistant Commissioner David Harrell was first suspended and then effectively dismissed.¹³⁰ The repercussions of Howth

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.33.

¹³⁰ Irish Volunteers brought in a large quantity of rifles into Howth on 26 July and

'thoroughly disheartened every police official in Ireland',¹³¹ but worst was to come. Despite the payment of war bonuses after Easter 1916, the pay increases were eroded by wartime inflation and Chamberlain later discouraged further pay increases, contending that the constabulary should suffer the same privations as everybody else during the conflict.¹³²

At the end of May 1914, the Belfast commissioner reported that the 'U.V.F. in the city now numbers 24,509 men and the majority of them are fairly well trained and armed'.¹³³ Amazed at the 'very perfect' organisation of the U.V.F., Smith was astonished at the 'discipline and obedience shown by the rough and hitherto irrepressible element. Were it not for this there must have been serious trouble in Belfast long ago'.¹³⁴ Clearly then, on the eve of war, the U.V.F. in Belfast was a formidable force. The Irish Volunteers, by contrast, although numerous, had largely been subsumed by Redmond's party and were poorly trained, armed and organised. There were about 2,100 Volunteers in Belfast and they held weekly drill parades at

attempted to convey them to Dublin. Troops, ordered by Harrell, attempted to intercept them, but after much wrangling the army returned to the city empty handed. En route the troops were stoned by an angry mob in Batchelor's Walk and opened fire killing three and wounding thirty-eight. Harrel was blamed in a subsequent inquiry and forced to resign.

¹³¹ Typescript memoir by R.I.C. Assistant Commissioner S. Waters, quoted in C. Townshend, 'Policing Insurgency in Ireland, 1914-23', in D.M. Anderson and D. Killingray (eds.), *Policing and Decolonising, Politics, Nationalism and the Police, 1917-65* (Manchester, 1992), p.29.

¹³² Minute by Sir Neville Chamberlain, 14 June 1915 (N.A.I., C.S.O., R.P., 1916/14810).

¹³³ Synopsis of County Inspectors' Reports for the Month of May 1914 (P.R.O.(L), C.O., 904/93), f.222.

¹³⁴ Inspector General and County Inspector Monthly Confidential Report, May 1914 (P.R.O.(L), C.O., 904/93), ff.274-5.

Shaun's Park and in halls at Victoria and North Queen Streets.¹³⁵ Although 'supported by all sections of the Nationalist party in the city', the average attendance at drill parades and on the 'occasional' route march was just 400.¹³⁶ The lightly armed Volunteers were not considered a threat by the police, and they were, as Chamberlain later remarked, 'only formidable on paper'.¹³⁷ The rump of men and women who did not join Redmond, formed an Irish Volunteer organisation, and in October 1914 there were just 120 supporters of the movement in Belfast.¹³⁸ By 1917 they had 'made little headway' with just 13,474 volunteers and 2,260 rifles between them.¹³⁹

The R.I.C. in Belfast had come a long way from 1886 in its control of crowds. "Domestication" had made the use of police firearms virtually unthinkable, but that had brought its problems too. Reliance on an unwilling military for the final solution had left the R.I.C. exposed to criticism over the shipyard riots of 1912. The disorder could not have been averted by the force and, whilst the use of country detachments was abhorrent to the R.I.C., it would have to suffer both verbal and physical brickbats. Was the city force complicit in the gunrunning? Undoubtedly a minority were, if only to "tip the wink", but from the outset the R.I.C. were hamstrung by inadequate intelligence, stringent U.V.F. security, poor legislative options and a

¹³⁵ Inspector General and County Inspector Monthly Confidential Report, June 1914 (P.R.O.(L), C.O., 904/93), f.516A.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ Inspector General and County Inspector Monthly Confidential Report, November 1914 (P.R.O.(L), C.O., 904/95), f.216.

¹³⁸ 'Precis of Information received in the Crime Special Branch during the month of October 1914' (P.R.O.(L), C.O., 904/120/S), f.113.

¹³⁹ Dublin Castle Records, undated but circa March 1917 (P.R.O.(L), C.O., 904/29/2), ff.331-3.

government patently reluctant to challenge the growth of private armies. As Dublin Castle was later to admit, 'the discontinuance of the Acts [Peace Preservation (Ireland) Acts] proved disastrous to the maintenance of good order throughout Ireland'.¹⁴⁰ The malaise that affected the city force was a direct result of the unfinished business of 1907 and, if it made the force less efficient as a result, and it probably did, it is hardly astonishing. But the Home Rule crisis was not of the force's creation and ultimately beyond its capacity to solve.

In August 1914, following the outbreak of war, the Belfast commissioner echoed the thoughts of many in Ulster when he wrote that 'a good deal of anxiety is felt by both sides as to the fate of the Home Rule Bill'.¹⁴¹ Each side was united only in its mistrust of government. As if to add immediacy to his words, it was reported that following the revocation of the Royal Proclamations on 5 August, two Colt machine guns, 1,400 rifles and a sizable quantity of ammunition had reached Belfast for the U.V.F.¹⁴² However, on 18 September 1914, the Home Rule Bill was placed on the statute book and simultaneously a Suspensory Act was passed, postponing operation of the Bill until war's end. The U.V.F. would later be bled white on Flanders' fields and many of Redmond's Irish Volunteers would join them; the I.R.B. element of the Irish Volunteers would participate at the birth of Yeat's 'terrible beauty' and the R.I.C. would enter its own 'dark eleventh hour'.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, f.323.

¹⁴¹ Inspector General and County Inspector Monthly Confidential Report, August 1914 (P.R.O.(L), C.O., 904/94). f.234.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, f.213.

CONCLUSION

In its metamorphosis from Peel's Peace Preservation Force to the Royal Irish Constabulary, the police force that served most of Ireland outside Dublin was generally successful in transforming itself from a force which contained agrarian and public disorder to one which policed the peace. But, the exception to this general rule was Belfast. From the outset the R.I.C. was confronted with a special set of difficulties rarely experienced elsewhere in Ireland. Replacing a local borough police force, which was in many respects an appendage of a Protestant dominated council, the denominationally mixed constabulary was regarded as a government controlled and hostile agency imposed upon the Protestant majority. This factor alone would have been enough to cause problems, but in addition to the sectarian considerations and the loss of community control, there was a feeling in working-class areas that these constables were pursuing a moralising agenda which owed much to middle-class Victorian values and would irrevocably change the way workers pursued their leisure activities.

During the first eleven years of its tenure of Belfast, the force imposed those values and policed the town in much the same way as it had done throughout Ireland, but instead of a gradual acquiescence, the R.I.C. was stubbornly resisted in its endeavours and the force, highly centralised, disciplined and regulated, had neither the flexibility nor the ability to innovate. The riots of 1886 changed all that. Although the R.I.C. had begun to lose its semi-military edge by 1886, it was still expected to perform those functions that had been its original *raison d'être*, but, as we have seen, it failed spectacularly in Belfast and this failure led both government and the force to readdress comprehensively the way the force policed the town. The

new strategy was really a hastening of what was occurring elsewhere in the countryside. It manifested itself in an increased drive by the force to divorce itself from its semi-military ethos, but, as elsewhere, it was constrained by a highly centralised police bureaucracy which deadened local initiative. One of the most powerful men in the police hierarchy, the Town Inspector or Commissioner of Belfast, was never powerful enough to lift that dead hand of police bureaucracy sufficiently to be genuinely innovative. However, with the limited discretion available, both the Commissioner and his men made significant efforts to appease their detractors after 1886.

Those detractors were myriad and were often following an agenda which had little to do with improving either the force or its policing of Belfast. The council rarely had much time for the R.I.C. and the strength of localism made it obvious that its abiding wish was the return of a council-controlled municipal police. The ad hoc and generally poor working relationship between the council and the R.I.C. impeded its operational effectiveness. The Protestant majority population, both middle and working-class, were frequent and vociferous critics of the force and in 1886 both classes combined in their communal hatred of the R.I.C. to make the riots prolonged and bloody affairs. The Catholics of Belfast frequently viewed the R.I.C. through the prism of Irish nationalism and this distorted their picture of a local force which attempted to be impartial from the beginning. Belfast's newspapers were frequently similarly disposed to attack the police on many levels, and their lack of support also hindered the force's effectiveness.

Of course, there were times when the force was its own worst enemy; 1886 and the "Neeson Case" are two obvious examples. Yet the problem for the R.I.C. was

really an inherent one. The skills required to provide a civil community-based service were entirely different from those needed to suppress a riot, yet the R.I.C. had to provide both of those skills in Belfast simultaneously. The R.I.C., with its centralised, unitary semi-military structure, had to cope with the complexities of civil policing requiring tact and diplomacy and semi-military policing entailing authority and force. However, this dichotomous position was never truly resolved within the Belfast constabulary, although it did make attempts to provide a lighter style of policing after 1886, and this had begun to bear fruit by 1914. Quite possibly, if that less aggressive approach had been complemented in times of severe disorder by the timely and efficacious use of the army, the damage to the force's reputation would have been less enduring as each riot succeeded the other.

Despite evidence of a grudging use and acceptance of the force, the R.I.C. could not be described as popular and its status within Belfast did not carry with it the same connotations of respectability and affection that was accorded the constabulary elsewhere. However, given the sectarian divisions in Belfast, it was probably beyond the capacity of any contemporary force to be perceived as both popular and impartial. As we have seen, the political problems of Belfast often dictated the way it was policed. Policing the divided society that was Belfast during this period was therefore an almost impossible task.

The Belfast "peeler" was no different from his rural counterpart and shared the same problems of slow promotion, lagging rates of pay and an over-regulation of his daily life and that of his family. Like his rural colleague he suffered from bouts of low morale but, unlike his rural counterpart, he was more prepared to agitate for better conditions, and in the first fourteen years of the twentieth century the city

force was in various stages of discontent. This lengthy period of restlessness, marked by the 1907 confrontation, was exacerbated by very uncertain prospects for the future. It is a testament to the discipline of the force that it continued to perform its duty, but such restlessness must have had an adverse impact on efficiency.

There is a saying in Belfast that you cannot argue with a Belfastman without a police whistle and perhaps that is a fitting metaphor for the overall question of policing the city. The sectarian divisions of Belfast created tensions which the police had to contain and control, and their record of success in this regard was at best an erratic one. However, they could never cure those divisions by dint of good police work. As we enter the first decade of the twenty-first century, it is clear that little has changed or is likely to, until the people, rather than the police, work out their differences.

APPENDIX ONE

'The Belfast Special Bobbies and King Mob

An Original Ballad composed by one of the Belfast Specials. Copyright!

Search Ireland again.

Over hill and over glen,

And you cannot find a finer company of men:

Our favour they command, they are such a gallant band;

And then their only weapons are the batons in their hand.

When Riot in the town

Did trample order down;

Our noble Mayor could trust in the lovers of the Crown,

For Church and state they stand;

They're a most devoted band, and then their only weapons are the batons in their
hand.

There is Charley, Tom and Dick,

Who can use their bit of stick,

Ned Luke and Andy Gilmore - we need'nt mention Mick:

And father Mackay too,

Who's the boy could chose a few,

All noble valiant fellows where there's any work to do.

See them going up and down

In those districts of the town

Where the frantic mob were furious as the devils in a pawn,

How gallant is their mien, when one or more is seen
 To seize and take offender to Mc Kitterick or Green!

Fell Bigotry and Hate

The bitterest feuds create,

But the Specials are no bigots - they are pillars of the State:

They are loyal to the Crown,

They are valiant for the town:

They will wipe away the stigma from its eminent renown.

Ah, brothers! One and all,

Upon you with hope we call,

To bring the fiend of Riot to its everlasting fall:

Let the first town of the land

As the first for order stand,

And more and more our Arts and our Commerce will expand.

Then Andy, Dick and Ned,

Let your kindling fervour spread,

And all our worthy citizens no more may terror dread;

As your fervour will increase,

So the bigots powers will cease,

He who goads the mob to frenzy, then chatters for a peace.

Let praises fill the air

For our Magistrates and Mayor,

And all the men who laboured our order to repair!

King Mob they trampled down,

Gave repose unto the town:

In life may they be honoured, and immortal their renown!

Printed for the Author by Thomas Henry, 7 Pottingers Entry'.

This street ballad is undated but the accompanying letter states the date to be 5

December 1864, Larcom Papers (N.L.I., MS 7626).

APPENDIX TWO

'Battle of the Brickfields

With guns and pistols, and blades like crystals,
And stick and bludgeon, and stone and sling,
And the police eyein' the brickbats flyin'
And the kilties dancin' the Highland Fling.

But for powder scanty, Och! not one in twenty
Would have survived, as each party owns.
And we were all stranded till the women banded
And politely handed round the paving stones.

On the mighty slaughter where blood ran like water,
Or the wounded heroes, I needn't dwell.
But for that Sunday, and for more than one day,
The worms in Shankill, sure they feasted well'.

From the *Northern Whig* newspaper 1872, quoted in A. Boyd, *Holy War in Belfast* (Tralee, 1969), p.107.

APPENDIX THREE**'Ulster'**

'The dark eleventh hour
Draws on and sees us sold
To every evil power
We fought against of old.
Rebellion, rapine, hate,
Oppression, wrong and greed
Are loosed to rule our fate,
By England's act and deed.

The Faith in which we stand,
The laws we made and guard-
Our honour, lives, and land-
Are given for reward
To Murder done by night,
To Treason taught by day,
To folly, sloth, and spite,
And we are thrust away.

The blood our fathers spilt,
Our love, our toils, our pains,
Are counted us for guilt,
And only bind our chains.

Before an Empire's eyes
The traitor claims his price.
What need of further lies?
We are the sacrifice.

We asked no more than leave
To reap where we had sown,
Through good and ill to cleave
To our own flag and throne.
Now England's shot and steel
Beneath that flag must show
How loyal hearts should kneel
To England's oldest foe.
We know the wars prepared
On every peaceful home,
We know the hells declared
For such as serve not Rome-
The terror, threats, and dread
In market, hearth, and field-
We know, when all is said,
We perish if we yield.

Believe, we dare not boast,
Believe, we do not fear-

We stand to pay the cost

In all that men hold dear.

What answer from the North?

One Law, one Land, one Throne.

If England drive us forth

We shall not fall alone!

Rudyard Kipling, 1912.

The Works of Rudyard Kipling (Ware, 1994), pp.232-3.

APPENDIX FOUR

Year	Indictable Offences	Summary Offences	Housebreaking Burglary	Assault on RIC in Belfast	Assault on DMP	Drunk & Disorderly
1870	54	15,117	4	616	840	8,776
1875	118	13,366	4	438	837	7,776
1880	173	20,535	1	606	747	7,359
1885	172	13,933	30	626	540	6,170
1890	168	16,266	9	493	464	7,522
1895	910	12,849	27	317	244	5,729
1900	2,134	14,226	47	393	291	5,444
1905	2,036	13,860	46	370	210	4,783
1910	1,888	18,834	64	257	209	3,986
1914	1,769	20,282	51	294	185	5,098

Population of Belfast

1870: 174,394

1880: 208,122

1890: 256,000

1900: 273,079

1910: 349,180

1914: 386,947

Strength of the Belfast R.I.C

1870: 444

1875: 541

1880: 526

1885: 528

1890: 751

1895: 824

1900: 931

1905: 1,047

1910: 1,048

1914: 1,252

Source: *Judicial Statistics (Ireland), 1870-1914.*

APPENDIX FIVE

* * * * *

‘And now the busy policeman lays his truncheon on the shelf,
 And every merchant in the town must hustle for himself.
 He swops the helmet for the snooze, his baton for the stick.
 And cries, ‘Let burglaries go on, its hard to catch Old Nick’.
 Meantime, the merchant sits up nights and says ‘an awful fag;’
 The copper may be very smart (*sic*), but the burglar gets the swag’.

* * * * *

‘So now, it seems, oh, Burglar Bill,
 That when you come to steal my plate
 For forcing door or safe or till
 A jemmy’s sadly out of date.

No more with centrebit and keys
 You’ll issue from your squalid den:
 Your tools are subtler than these-
 A blowpipe and some oxygen.

Your thieving arts you’ll ne’er rehearse
 O’er quite unprofitable ‘lays’;
 The secrets of your victim’s purse
 Are now unmasked by Rontgen’s rays.

No more with pistol or with knife
 A rash antagonist you’ll floor;
 But rather, to conclude the strife,
 Uncork your H₂so₄.

No more then will the foe of banks
 Be Sykes who swears or Bill who drinks,
 He’ll be recruited from the ranks
 Of those who took ‘a first in stinks.’”

Source: *The Belfast Critic*, 16 March 1901.

APPENDIX SIX

'Ode to the Man of the Week- 'The Chief'.

'Are you there, Mor-i-ar-i-tee?'

(Thank you, my dear; yes, I've got them)

Because, if so,

What I want to know is

Why the ***

Don't you stop

These infernal Burglaries?

I do not wish to be unkind,

Moriarty-

Beg pardon, I mean

Chief Commissioner Moriarty-

And if I knew

How,

I would salute you

In the usual manner;

But this burglary scare

Is a bit too much

For me.

The worst of it is

That it is so

Infectious!

Talk about the

Small-pox,

Likewise the

Typhoid scare-

Why, they are

Fools to this.

I look to you,

My dear Chief Commissioner,

As the moral disinfectant

Of Belfast.

I promise faithfully

If you will only keep the burglars

From the office-safe

(In which reposes the sum of

1s. 4 1/2d., in silver),

Never to slate you.

I would not, for instance,

Say, like my friend

'O',

That you can't ride, or

That your walking is,

Well, to say the least of it,

Off.

Still, do, for Heaven's sake,
Stop these burglaries.
A moral town like
Belfast-
And we all know how moral we are-
Should not harbour mere
Burglars.
As you know,
We do things on a far bigger scale:
All our local burglars
Are City- -;
They rob us,
But
Oh, how grandly they do it!
Don't they,
Mor-i-ar-i-tee?'

Wotto.

Source: *The Belfast Critic*, 25 May 1901.

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