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The Vigilant Eye: Policing in Canada from Confederation to 9/11

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INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

The police are a vital public service, gatekeepers to the criminal justice system and the most visible symbol, for the public, of that system. Crime statistics, for example, are commonly based on incidents reported to the police. A number of Canada's urban police forces (inspired by the London Metropolitan Police of 1829) are nearly 200 years old and 'territorial' police services such as the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) and provincial police (modeled on the Royal Irish Constabulary) predate Confederation. Apart from a few official histories, journalistic accounts and academic case studies, we know next to nothing about the operational history of ordinary policing in Canada. Important academic work has been produced on RCMP security and intelligence operations and on popular culture representations of the 'Mounties,' but very little on the force's criminal policing role. The neglect of policing history is part of a larger problem: the lack of a basic institutional history of Canada's justice system.

STUDY AIMS

This study will be the first overview of the history of policing in Canada, with an emphasis on not only the North West Mounted Police/RCMP but also municipal and provincial police. The author stresses the contested and complex nature of policing, with emphasis on the image versus the realities of law enforcement, the tension between professional autonomy and political accountability and the history of the relationship between police and marginalized groups such as workers, immigrants, First Nations, political dissidents, visible minorities, and homosexuals. It uses the term 'visible eye' to suggest that the single most important function of both operational and security and intelligence policing has been surveillance and information gathering.

The study also explores tensions within the world of policing and summarizes police responses to organized labour and political dissent, including the policing of large scale public protests. The author attempts to bridge the gap between sanitized official histories of police services and the more critical, theoretically-informed analyses of sociology and criminology.

DISCUSSION

This work in progress is an overview of Canada's policing history from Confederation to the early 21st century. It is based on 30 years of research and places the development of policing within the evolving academic literature on social and legal history.

The chapter breakdown is as follows:
Introduction

- 1: Policing Early British North America
- 2: Policing the New Dominion 1867-1900
3. Policing the Urban Age: 1900-45
4. The Police and Post-1945 Society
5. Policing Organized Labour and Political Dissent
6. Epilogue

CONCLUSIONS

The study highlights a number of important themes that suggest how the evolution of policing can help us understand current and future issues. One of the most important is the need for public legitimacy. Another is that policing, despite official narratives to the contrary, has been contested and that the police often have supported the status quo at the expense of the socially marginal. Despite their operational autonomy and distinct subculture, the police have existed within a larger societal context. Occupational hostility to recruiting women in the 1970s, and homosexuals in the 1980s, for example, reflected not simply a 'police' attitude, but society's current anxieties over social change.

Many current challenges, such as relations with First Nations and visible minorities, are rooted in history and cannot be addressed without a full understanding of the past.

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