

POLICING HONG KONG
— AN IRISH HISTORY

Patricia O'Sullivan

BLACKSMITH BOOKS

*To the memory of Murty Ned and Dan O'Sullivan of Barnacurra,
Newmarket, Co. Cork, and of Ann O'Brien, née O'Sullivan, who
between them all started me on this journey.*

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INTRODUCTION

From its inception in 1841 the Hongkong Police Force mirrored the racially divided structure of the rest of the British Empire, with career civil servants commanding an organisation comprising contingents of Chinese, Indian and European men. Not until 1920, and gaining momentum after the Asia-Pacific War (1941-1945) were local men integrated into the inspectorate and above. In the years before, the British constables held the superior position over their Indian and Chinese counterparts, but they were just ordinary working class men motivated by the chance of a pension and a more financially rewarding job than they could hope for back home. For many, acquaintance with the Far East lasted just the one five-year term before they returned to the 'real life' of British towns and cities, marriage and family.

In contrast, over a period of more than eighty years, men came to the colony from one small Irish town, making their careers in the Police Force and their home in this borrowed city. Newmarket, Co. Cork numbered about 1,200 residents in the first decades of the twentieth century. At that time in Hongkong, at least twelve of her men were police officers and their family connections numbered nearly one hundred. Providing a somewhat unique community for these men, this situation also yields a rich seam of material for the modern researcher, or at least a great number of avenues to explore. Thus whilst these men and their families are the focus of this study, the aim is also to shed light on the life and work of the European constable in an era of which there are few traces in today's Hong Kong.

The Europeans

The role and life of the working class European in Hongkong, through the period of the colony's growth from a small, rather insignificant, outpost

of the British Empire to international entrepôt and commercial centre, is one that has been largely overlooked by the standard histories. Always a tiny percentage of Hongkong's population, these westerners, 'Europeans' in the terminology of the time, stood primarily for those from the British Isles, but also included Americans and Canadians, Germans, Italians and others. Over the period covered by this study the population of the island of Hongkong grew from 121,000 to over a million in 1940, the growth fuelled, naturally, by the great numbers coming from the Chinese mainland to seek work and livelihood in the colony.¹ The Europeans generally accounted for about 3% of the total, with another 2% from other non-ethnic Chinese groups.²

Of these westerners perhaps one quarter occupied senior positions in commerce, trade or the Administration, wealthy enough to live on the higher roads or up on the Peak. In the absence of the great land-owning families of the motherland, these men with their families formed the self-appointed élite of the colony. Forming a 'middle class' were the accountants, solicitors, engineers, highly skilled mechanics and the like whose education and occupation gave them a certain independence, usually with sufficient funds to return home should they wish.

The working classes

The majority of the Europeans, however, were not so free to come and go, for it could take three or four years of assiduous saving to amass passage money. Some, such as the police, were bound to their employers for a set period, and, akin to the army, would have to purchase their discharge if they wanted to be released before the set date. Recruited by advertisement, or through their employers, a trickle at the outset turning into a steady stream by the beginning of the twentieth century, rank and file British men were brought out from 'home' to attend to the clerical routine of commerce, banking, trade, shipping and insurance businesses, and to run

1 In 1940 there were also estimated to be three quarters of a million refugees from the north. During the period of the Japanese occupation the population dropped by around 50%, but thereafter began the explosive growth that would characterise the rest of the century.

2 Held in the National Archives, at Kew, London, the census records appear in annual *Blue Books* series CO133.

the day to day administration of the Governor and his Councils. In large part these men would stay for between five and twenty-five years, for by forty-five a man was sapped of much of his vigour and strength. The enervating climate in the days before air conditioning and refrigeration, together with exposure to the diseases of the tropics before effective cures and vaccines, took its toll on all but the hardiest of constitutions. For most, return home was the goal, with a small pension and some savings, probably to find some less demanding work for later life.

While British men were in Hongkong they occupied a predominantly masculine world, with only a minority in the position to support a family, let alone successfully persuade a woman of their acquaintance in Britain to take on the challenge of being a colonial wife.³ Unyielding racial and class prejudices combined to mean that only those of particularly strong character, or near the bottom of the social scale would consider taking a local Chinese wife, although no such scruples existed about forming less permanent connections. But this lack of family-based European society reflected the situation for most of the majority Chinese population too, for whom Hongkong was a workplace and not a home, wives and children staying in their villages of the southern region of the mainland.

Thus most of these British men were separated by six-week ship journey, and more in the early years, from their own people. Ties of friendship, occupation, mess, clubs, church, lodge and sporting teams had to stand in place of domestic life. For those who did return from leave with a new bride, the perennial shortage of married quarters led them to look for accommodation in the ethnically mixed parts of the town, but this rarely involved any integration into the local community. Women generally restricted their social contacts to others in their spouse's occupation group, e.g. the police wives mixing with those from other government departments only when a man had transferred there, and was therefore already known. There is little evidence to suggest that when service in the

3 In 1864, the start of the period studied here, the adult European population numbered 1100 men and 432 women, however, the latter figure includes an undisclosed number of wives of the men of the garrison since they lived in private quarters in the town. The garrison, numbering around 1250 was not included in the population figures.

colony finished, the friendships made between the families continued to a great degree.

Passing references to the lower-paid Europeans appear in the general histories of Hongkong (Cameron, Endacott, Sayer, Welsh *et al.*), but H. J. Lethbridge's article *Conditions of the European Working Class in Nineteenth Century Hong Kong* is one of the few specific treatments of the subject.⁴ Lethbridge presents a bleak picture of the lives of the majority of Europeans in Hongkong in the second half of the nineteenth century: his thesis is that the working class lived continually on the periphery of society, both European and Chinese, in a 'no-man's land' between the communities. He attributes their continued presence in Hongkong largely to a familiarity with discipline and hierarchically imposed order for the many discharged soldiers amongst their number, and secondly to the poor level of wages attainable in Britain at the time.

Studies are beginning to appear on the Chinese working class. In English these are represented notably by David Faure's work on the '*common people*'.⁵ Some interest has emerged in exploring the commonalities between those dependent on the weekly or monthly pay packet within the different ethnic groups, acknowledging that as much as the cultures kept themselves apart, often through entirely mutual disdain, there is a greater history, full of examples of the interdependence of the peoples.

The Irish

The Scots, from Taipans to clerks, might have dominated trade in Victorian Hongkong, but the senior ranks of the Administration were more broadly representative of the British Isles. Of pre-1941 governors, eight were Irish and two more had Irish parentage, and all, bar John Pope Hennessy, from the Anglo-Irish Protestant ascendancy. The Civil Service examinations were the route for many an educated, middle class Irishman, be he a member of the Established Church or Roman Catholic, to gain his advancement in society, even if that then meant a period of service in the colonies. The Catholic Church had been early

4 Lethbridge, *Hong Kong: Stability and Change*.

5 Faure *The Common People in Hong Kong History* in ed. Lee *Colonial Hong Kong and Modern China*.

present in the newly emerging colony along with the troops and sailors that secured it. But although they were ministering to large contingents of Irish soldiers, the mission was mainly staffed by Italian priests from the neighbouring Portuguese Macao, later joined by a growing number of locally ordained men, and French and Italian nuns with a particular care for the many abandoned baby girls (Chinese) and orphans of the colony. The first years of the period covered were also the tail end of post-famine emigration from Ireland, but this had little impact on the population here. The preferred destinations of the hundreds of thousands fleeing the dire conditions of the mid-century were, of course, the United States and later Australia, from which a return journey for retirement was not envisaged.

The Police

The police became the subject of this study following the discovery that not only had the author's grandfather and great uncle been members, but that they were related to a group of men whose service spanned almost a century, and whose numbers were out of all proportion to the size of the little place whence they all hailed. Initially, that discovery called for just an unearthing of their particular stories, but the remit gradually widened over time to encompass their work, environment, families and society, i.e., the European working class policeman's life. That said, if one approached the subject from the general outlook rather than the particular, it would be hard to find a better group of men on whom to focus. For the most part (from 1872 onwards) their arrival in Hongkong was officially arranged, they joined an organisation that was well documented and with a stable leadership, if they progressed in the Force their individual careers would be noted in annually produced records, and they are often mentioned by name in the newspapers of the time. Compared with, for example, those working for the banks or shipping firms, or even in other branches of the civil service, these are men with a visible presence in the community, which translates to some measure into a presence for the researcher.

But only to a certain measure. As noted, the police exist in government records, largely because copies were routinely sent to London, and went in the course of time into the National Archives. The occupation by Japanese

forces from the last days of 1941 until 14th August 1945 was a profound rupture in Hongkong's history. Documents that had been assiduously kept were destroyed, either by the British to save them from falling into enemy hands, by the Japanese during the occupation or by white ants and mould in the years afterwards, when the need to reconstruct the ruined city overwhelmed all other considerations.

History in general has quite an uphill task in a place as focussed on achieving progress as contemporary Hong Kong. The present Hong Kong Police Force have had little contact with their history in comparison to many forces in the United Kingdom, although recently material on its earlier story has appeared on its website alongside a series of articles about its more recent past. The small Police Museum on Coombe Road, once the Wanchai Gap Station, is staffed by the Museums Department of the government, and holds a large number of artefacts, arranged to tell the story of earlier days and more recent issues on a thematic basis, but little in the way of documented history. However, the Special Administrative Region is increasingly integrating its time as a British colony into its wider history and identity, and the stories of organisations and people of that time are becoming less the preserve of the expatriate community, as much as an acknowledged part of the common heritage of Hong Kong residents.

An interesting parallel to the fate of Hongkong's police history can be found in that of the Irish Republic. For most of the period of this study, Ireland was, of course, administratively, politically and economically part of the United Kingdom. Only since independence and the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1923 has its police force, An Garda Síochána, answered to Irish masters, rather than those in London who controlled its predecessor, the Royal Irish Constabulary. Like Hongkong, documented history in Ireland comes up against problems: many of the centrally held records were destroyed in the attack on the Four Courts in 1922, whilst the identification of the RIC as an enemy force meant that local records were often also destroyed in the early 1920s. Ireland, too, has a Force Museum in Dublin Castle, staffed by serving police, and alongside many artefacts has a good library of material, albeit mostly relating to the post-1923 period.

It has already been mentioned that the European police often appear by name in the newspapers, and it is largely from this same source that a rich trove of stories emerges, building a picture of the work a constable or inspector might expect to do, the people with whom he would deal with and the problems he would encounter. This has been supplemented by verifiable accounts from children and grandchildren of the men, which have been most generously shared with the author throughout this project. One story, though, is of greater significance to this group than any other, and was the reason that this whole journey started. At the beginning of 1918, shortly before the disastrous Happy Valley Racecourse fire, Inspector Mortimer O'Sullivan, along with four other policemen, lost his life in a bloody and violent incident in a tenement in Wanchai. It was to uncover the facts about this dimly recalled event in family history that the initial enquiries were made. All the rest has grown from there, and whilst this book attempts to reflect all aspects of the colonial policeman's life, it will also serve to show that, then as now, and the world over, ensuring a secure and peaceful existence for the community requires a police force whose individual members face risks the rest of society would find unacceptable.

The Men from Newmarket, Co. Cork

The group of men – and women – who are the subject of this study had rather a different experience of colonial Hongkong to that outlined earlier, and stand in sharp contrast to Lethbridge's view of the working man as a mere pawn of the state. Of twenty men, all but five were born in the small town of Newmarket or its surrounding townlands (hamlets) in north County Cork, Ireland, and the remaining were connected by marriage. The trail of men began with two individuals, who arrived independently of one another, almost a decade apart, and who caused, for the most part directly, fourteen more men to journey from Newmarket and join the Hongkong Police Force. Only one man, the second of the original pair, had previous police experience, in the London Metropolitan Police Force. Whilst two transferred to other government departments, and four served just one five year term, the majority of men made their career

in the Force. Not all were to see Ireland again, four dying during their police careers.

Newmarket (Áth Trasna), like so much of Munster (the south western quadrant of Ireland) is known for dairy farming, and it was thus that the men were engaged before commencing their new lives. No working farmer's life is one of ease, but a combination of good soil, amenable climate, a benevolent landowner and good infrastructure helped most of the farms in the neighbourhood to prosper. The large families of the time did mean that there were sons to spare, but the manner in which these men were recruited (by successfully established fellow Newmarket men), and the fact that it was often elder sons who answered the call suggests that their choice was made not by dire financial necessity but by real prospects. This was no 'last resort', but a rare opportunity to rise in the world for men whose future would otherwise not be one of poverty, but would be rather predictable.

Brother following brother, or cousins arriving one after the other was not unknown by any means, and, albeit less frequently, son followed father into the Hongkong Police Force. However, so far as can be discovered, the size of the group of men connected with Newmarket does seem to be unique in the Force's history, and perhaps in Hongkong at the time too. At one point, around 1912-13, there were ten, possibly twelve Newmarket men serving in the Force, out of a total of about 170 European policemen. But it was precisely because this kinship group existed, reinforced and broadened by the descendants of the two pioneers, that these men could persevere in their careers. As noted, these men had no police experience, no experience of making a life away from home and family, and Hongkong was then, much more so than today, the ultimate break from the apron strings. Others had to find their sense of belonging in clubs, masonic lodges, billiards teams, shooting parties etc: the Newmarket men had a "little Ireland in the East" to affirm their identity. But alongside that creation of a discrete community, and acting as counterbalance, it can be seen that those men whose careers took them away from the colonial Police Force developed much stronger links with the local community, particularly the Portuguese in Hongkong.

The experience of life and work in Hongkong had profound effects on all the families who returned, and for most this was transformational. None of the men returned to farming, except in very part-time ways, almost none to their home town, even when the political situation in Ireland made that possible.⁶ Children went to university, entered professions, rose to prominence in the government, church, army and medical professions amongst others. Yes, children from Irish farms were starting to have more opportunities at this time, but colonial service provided these families with an enviable head start.

Inevitably, and by its nature, this study sees Hongkong through almost exclusively European eyes. The paternalist, intolerant and frequently prejudiced attitudes of these European visitors to a Chinese island were little questioned then, but grate roughly upon contemporary understanding and sensibilities. However, as part of the history that is here recorded, there is little that can be done but to acknowledge that they belong only to a time now long past. This book does not attempt to justify or account for the British hegemony of the period: it is left to far better qualified writers to examine the impact of colonial rule here. Class, and its divisions, was given close attention by the insecure Hongkong European community, and it is used here as a convenient shorthand for the backgrounds and expectations of different sectors, without challenging the late nineteenth-, early twentieth- century concept. Finally, this study neither claims nor aims to be a definitive history of police in Hongkong, but to give small, almost domestic, snapshots to illustrate an otherwise neglected part of Hong Kong's heritage.

6 The author's grandfather kept cows for a time, which he grazed in Phoenix Park, Dublin.