

Section 7: Police as a professional body

Elizabeth Plumridge
Rowan Carroll
New Zealand Police Museum

The Police and the control of crime

Police had a well-developed interest in crime statistics and their technology to analyse them was increasing; the Commissioner proudly explained in his Annual Report of **1919** that information on charges before Magistrates 'is now obtained on cards' which meant it would be increasingly possible to investigate 'ages and birthplaces' of persons arrested for some crimes.

The Police analysis was that the crime rate had reduced¹ and both the number of offences and the number of persons imprisoned declined over the last two years of the war². Crime rate against property (largely theft) was traditionally greater than crime against persons (most usually assault), but during the war there was a dramatic decline in the rate of 'other offences'. This was said to be 'largely due' to decreased drunkenness for which convictions fell in 1916, 1917, and in 1918. Nevertheless there were 6,999 summary convictions for various states of drunkenness in 1918, 532 of them against women.

There was a relatively low level of social disorder. Of the 6,390 persons arrested in 1918, 'no fewer than 5,100 were convicted for offences against good order, and of these 4,203 were for drunkenness'. Over 700 were convicted for indecent, riotous, or offensive conduct... using obscene, threatening, or abusive language [and]... for assaulting, resisting, or obstructing the police'

Punishment could be severe but was perhaps increasingly aimed at rehabilitation. In 1918 only one fifth of convicted offenders were ordered to come up for sentence. In a 'very few cases' individuals reappeared. 'In other words' said the Commissioner, 'the recording of a conviction and the ordering of the prisoner to come up for sentence when called upon has usually the effect of deterring him from further crime, and is probably more efficacious than a definite punishment would be'.

Nevertheless there were still some severe sanctions available. In 1918 several young boys as young as 12 were given a dozen strokes of the birch for theft; in 1917 one 10 year old was given six strokes of the birch for breaking and entering and another boy was birched for

¹ Table1: number and rate of offences, 1913 - 1918

year	Total number of convictions	
	Number.	Per 1,000 Mean Population.
1913	38,748	36.26
1914	40,410	37.06
1915	38,219	34.76
1916	34,196	31.1
1917	32,771	29.82
1918	27,834	..

Source: New Zealand Official Yearbook 1918

² convictions in 1918 numbered 29,252, including 1,418 recorded against Maoris. In respect of 346 charges (23 of which were against Maoris) the accused were committed for sentence. Commitments for trial at the Supreme Courts numbered 467 (including 90 charges against Maoris). The total commitments (813) for 1918 represent a net decrease of 76 on the numbers for 1917'

escaping from an industrial home before he was returned to it. In 1916 a man was flogged and given 10 years' gaol for 'buggery' (Police Gazette 1917 294).

After the War

By end of 1918, the country was recovering from the demands of war, the influenza pandemic and awaiting the full return of the Expeditionary Forces. The estimated population of New Zealand was just over 1 million individuals and becoming northern and urban in its distribution. After the turn of the century the population of the North Island (59.22% in 1916) was greater than that of the South (40.78%) and after 1906 the urban population in boroughs (458,797 or 53.65%) overtook the rural population of counties (424,614 or 46.35%). But the population was still in many areas thinly distributed.

Given the spread of this population the post-war Police Force of 791 was not large: 669 men were constables, another 13 men were either district or native constables and there were 37 plain clothes detectives. There was one police officer for every 1,319 persons in New Zealand (which was a higher ratio than in any Australian state) and the per capita expenditure on the whole Police Force of 5/21/2d per head of population was lower than in any Australian state.

But if comparatively economical, the New Zealand Police Force was overstretched. During the course of the war, police functions increased and the ten police districts became, said the Commissioner, individually too large for 'efficient functioning'. By 1919, he wrote that the volume of post received in the various district offices 'practically engrosses the whole attention of the officer in charge' (AJHR H-16 AR 1919 P 7); evidently there was no separate administrative staff. Although the formation of one new police district in 1918 was therefore a 'considerable relief', the formation of other police districts which had been agreed to in principle had not come into existence 'owing to the difficulty of sparing men from general duty for office staff'. It seems that in the police stations of suburbs and countryside, if not in the head office, administrative duties were monopolising the time and attention of the most experienced and senior men.

At the same time, over the course of the last years of the war, police numbers dropped: there were small increases in 1915 and 1916 when the Force was at a war-time peak of 916 men but numbers dropped every year after that. This was probably at least in part to changing pressures on police. After December 1917, Police were required to 'scrupulously' abstain from recruiting any man liable for military conscription, and this meant the Force 'diminished seriously' by 1918 and was at its least by the end of that year. In 1919 police work was acknowledged as too poorly rewarded to attract recruits, 'given the high wages obtainable in civil occupations' so salary increases were given to all ranks bringing constables and detectives on to the bottom of the wage scale at 12/- per diem. Eventually conditions were improved for men who had resigned in order to go to the warfront, with superannuation rights and seniority restored.

In a number of ways, life in the police force during the war had not modernised, The traditional work on the beat for police was organised into two day shifts and one night shift. The dayshifts were broken into two four-hour shifts: first day shift 5.00am-9.00 am and again 1.00 pm- 5 pm; second day shift from 9.00 - 1.00pm and 5.00 to 9.00pm. A man worked these on alternate days. An officer on night shift worked from 9.00 pm until 5.00 am and had to supply in own food but was provided with a hot drink between midnight and 1.00 am and allowed to pause for 15 minutes to consume it, but could not leave his beat.

By the end of the war, men were no longer prepared to tolerate this. They argued that broken day shifts meant that it took them in practice 13 hours to work an 8 hour shift and was bad for home life and for health.

A man starting at 5.00 am would have to leave home at 4.30 am and would not return for breakfast until 9.30 am; if he had to attend the court he would have to leave home again 'almost immediately' to be at court by 10.00 am and probably not then return home until 11.00 am when he would 'require ... dinner'. He would have to leave for work again by 12.30 pm and not return until 5.30 pm. The men complained that this routine of two hearty meals of breakfast and midday dinner in close succession 'caused indigestion, and has a tendency to injure their health'.

The men made 'almost unanimous' representations to get this changed and have an 8 hour shift starting at 5.00am. The Commissioner was concerned that in practice this meant providing men with 2 meal breaks a day resulting in a decrease in hours, at least as important, 'men would have to be relieved for tea at the busiest hour of the day when every constable would be needed to control the heavy traffic at that time'. On top of this, an 8 hour shift would allow the men to live at a distance from their stations, which would mean they were 'not so easily mustered' in case of emergencies.

Nevertheless, the 8 hour system was introduced and other conditions of work were also addressed.

Police had been provided with accommodation but the housing stock had run down and the alternative of renting was ever-more expensive. In 1919 the Commissioner wrote that accommodation was now of 'serious embarrassment' and the 'utmost difficulty'; he estimated that £25,000 a year was estimated to be needed for 'some satisfactory solution ... (New Zealand Police Commissioners Annual Report 1919, p8).

In 1913, police had been given reluctant permission to join the Public Service Association but a police regulation prohibiting 'combinations of any kind' left this permission doubtful. When a new Police Commissioner was appointed in later 1916, he clarified permission despite the reservations of the Minister of Police; 'considerable numbers' of police joined up (ibid, p7). The Police Force entered the motorised 20th century with four 'motor vans' bought in 1919 resulting in 'considerable savings' as prison transports and ambulances but were excellent 'to convey the prisoner under cover through the streets to the police station' (ibid, p8).