

V. Conway (2010)

The Blue Wall of Silence: The Morris Tribunal and Police Accountability in Ireland Portland, OR: Irish Academic Press, 2010. xviii, 260 pp. \$80.49. ISBN: 978-0-71653030-5

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Vicky Conway's *The Blue Wall of Silence* is the first large-scale academic investigation into misconduct within *An Garda Síochána* (the Irish Republic's police force; usually referred to as the "Garda" and colloquially as "the Guards"). Critical analyses of police have special significance in Ireland because, especially compared to Northern Ireland,¹ there has been little empirical research on police in the Irish Republic. Vicky Conway helps fill this void with *The Blue Wall of Silence*, a thorough review and analysis of the Irish Government's Morris Tribunal to investigate police misconduct ("The Tribunal of Inquiry into Complaints Concerning some Gardai of the Donegal Division," <http://www.morristribunal.ie>). Those with interests in the *Garda* and in investigative police commissions will find Conway's book to be a valuable resource.

Traditionally the Guards, along with the Catholic Church and the Gaelic Athletic Association, were one of the pillar's of Irish society after independence from Britain in the early 1920s. In recent years, all three institutions have taken something of a beating: the scandals of the Catholic Church regarding child abuse in particular are well-known; less well-known was the Athletic Association's 100-year ban on "foreign" sports (such as soccer), lifted as late as 2005. In regards to the police, we currently have the Morris Tribunal that started with the death of the cattle dealer Richie Barron. The *Garda* acted as though it had discovered Barron's killers. As it turned out they were quite wrong—not only in their suspicions and methods—but even in the cause of death. Barron wasn't murdered; he was the victim of a hit-and-run accident (though the driver was never found). The fact that the *Garda* visited a pub prior to responding to the crime scene did not help their case nor did their subsequent attempts to cover their tracks. Indeed, it seems that the Barron affair was not the first case of Donegal police investigative misconduct and corruption. Donegal police had, it turned out, an unpleasant habit of lying, framing suspects, rough interrogations, and general criminal misbehavior.

The body that investigated the police in this case was the Morris Tribunal. Its eight reports, issued from 2004 to 2008, produced a scathing indictment of police culture and practices in Donegal Division: "willful blunders, gross negligence, laziness, [and] emotionally wrong-headed rushes to judge people as guilty." *The Blue Wall of Silence* provides a detailed and excellent account of these reports, including their antecedents in Irish police history and subsequent attempts at reform. Conway argues persuasively that the botched investigation of Barron's death was not the case of a few bad apples but rather the result of a totally inept and corrupt police institution.

According to sociologist Carl Klockars, "It is in the nature of the police task that guilt is assumed as a working premise." This "operative assumption of guilt" can help explain why police might *unintentionally* pursue the wrong person—and then pursue that person with great gusto. But such an interpretation, as Conway makes perfectly clear, would be too forgiving in the investigation of Barron's death. Perhaps Conway is justified in asserting that the Irish police are corrupt to the core. But with regards to police culture, it would be very interesting to hear what the members of the *Garda* themselves have to say.

Research on police culture is much more nuanced than *The Blue Wall of Silence* lets on. While informal nonsnitching codes are present in all cultures and professions, only for police (and ghetto youth) is this code so stigmatizing. What outsiders may see as a culture of active opposition, others have seen as a willful cloak of ignorance protecting officers from any consequences related to their colleagues' potential misdeeds. The motivation for this ignorance, significantly, is not occupational solidarity but rather a selfish and simple desire to preserve one's own government paycheck. The

omission of any police perspective is puzzling and, to me, reduces the impact and authority of this otherwise fine book.

As a case study of malfeasance, *The Blue Wall of Silence* makes its point extremely well. But rather than showing how these events have changed our understanding of police culture, the *Garda* are simply placed into standard sociological theories of police (mis)behavior. Attempts to draw broader conclusions are unconvincing: “While there may be reasons as to why certain misconduct occurred in Donegal. . . there is no reason why misconduct, abuse or corruption would be limited to that division” (p. 176). After all, notes Conway, “Donegal was investigated, not other divisions.” Certainly, outside of a police context, one would never expect (or stand for) such a simplistic assumption of guilt being applied to other professional or demographic groups. Without knowing more, one could just as easily believe that *Garda* in Donegal were investigated precisely because *they* were the problem.

It is too common in academic writing to begin with a proclamation of the corrupt nature of police work (dutifully citing the outstanding work—depending on which side of the ocean one sits—of Maurice Punch or Peter Manning) and then, after a few hundred pages, stirringly conclude that police are indeed institutionally corrupt. *The Blue Wall of Silence* identifies the limitations of reform in Ireland and says: “The lessons of the Morris Tribunal are clear: what is needed is not just a response to misconduct wherever it occurs, but an ongoing effort toward cultural and systemic reform to prevent misconduct” (p. 187). Absolutely. But how might that be done? The key question remains unanswered.

In the end, the story here—a suspicious death, a web of police lies, a government investigation, and all of it wrapped in a cloak of Irish provincialism—should be thrilling, at the very least as a police procedural. But Conway fails to convince the reader, or at least this non-Irish reader, why he or she should care at all. Through it all, Conway notes, the *Garda* hold an amazingly high level of public support. Is this really just the result of public ignorance, a misguided fear of gangland crime, and methodological flaws in survey design? In a low-crime country, 4 in 5 Irish view the police favorably (compared to about 3 in 5 neighboring countries and the United States). I could not help but think that perhaps some of the Irish police are doing something right. Conway, a well-voiced and bold critic of the Irish Police, never tells us what this might be.

Note

1. Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom and experienced the so-called “Troubles” during a period of 30 years (1969–1999) some 3,500 people died in “republican” IRA insurgency (predominantly Catholic, fighting for a united Ireland and removal of the British), the security forces’ (police, army, and intelligence agencies) legal and illegal response, and violence against republicans from “loyalist” paramilitary groups (predominantly Protestant and in support of Northern Ireland remaining within the United Kingdom).

T. Boyd-Caine

Protecting the Public? Detention and Release of Mentally Disordered Offenders

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In *Protecting the public? Detention and release of mentally disordered offenders*, Tessa Boyd-Caine focuses her research on “restriction order patients” admitted to and detained in high security and other hospitals in England and Wales. The author’s focus was particularly on the applications and decisions about discharge from the hospital and the supervision of these patients in the community.