

***Police Stories. Building the French State 1815-1851.* By John Merriman.** Oxford University Press. 2006. viii + 254 pp. £32.99

This book is both delightful and infuriating. Delightful because Merriman has the imagination to make small town life in early nineteenth-century France come alive, infuriating because from time to time whole paragraphs collapse into nonsense by the use of the wrong, even the opposite, word from that intended. Anyone who has worked in the police files of the series M of the departmental archives, and Merriman (I admit reluctantly) holds the record for departmental perorations, knows that the material is often tedious and opaque. Occasionally such qualities appear here, but on the whole the author has done marvels to illuminate one aspect of the evolution of the centralised state. The book has a thematic structure, focusing on how policing was systematised and took on a career structure, and what the police actually did. In big towns like Paris, Lyon and the fast-growing St Etienne, there was political unrest and a fair crop of murders and violent crime. Elsewhere, slight exaggeration might enliven the reports: 'Knock on a landmark in Vire and either a usurer, or a prostitute, or a sodomite will pop out'. Police life was mostly routine checks on travellers, vagrants, beggars, markets, traffic jams and sewage in the streets. Merriman uses the detail of police reports to present two main theses; first that during these years conflict between the mayor, who paid the police, and the prefect, who appointed them, gradually resolved in favour of the prefect, the representative of centralised authority. Next, that in this period the French police came to have a professional, rather than a political character. The argument is plausibly and at times entertainingly developed, but there is contraction. All *commissaires* were appointed by the Minister of the Interior. Thus their careers depended on serving whichever regime was in power.

Specialists in nineteenth-century French history will welcome this addition to Merriman's distinguished publication record. In the tradition of Clive Emsley and Richard Cobb, Merriman effortlessly shows us how the centralised state actually regulated society. Without a work book (*livret*) or a passport, the individual was a vagrant, to be shuffled back to where he or she came from. There are many who would regret that the modern state cannot function with such efficiency today.

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370 words