



# THE PEELER'S NOTEBOOK

— BARRY KENNERK —

POLICING VICTORIAN DUBLIN:  
MAD DOGS, DUELS AND DYNAMITE

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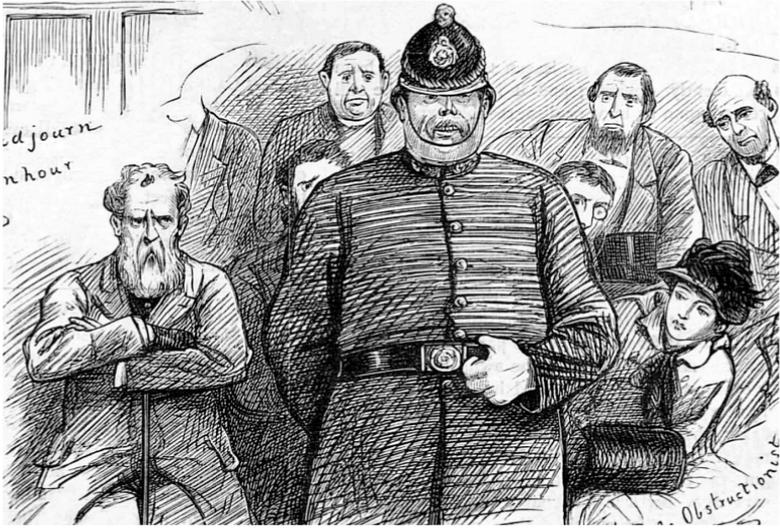
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# INTRODUCTION

The term 'Peeler' has, in modern parlance, come to refer to a police officer. It was coined shortly after the formation of Robert Peel's metropolitan police forces in London in 1829 and Dublin in 1836. Peel, who was undersecretary of Ireland, planned to replace the old city watchmen, and the Peace Preservation force that followed, with a more organised corps of men. Regarding the title of this book, the term is more than simply eponymous. 'Peeler' recalls the well-known idiom about keeping one's eyes peeled; it suggests vigilance and alertness.

The Dublin Metropolitan Police (DMP) spanned an extraordinary era in Irish history during which unarmed constables encountered urban Ribbonmen, grave robbers and gun-toting Fenians. The history of the force, recounted by Jim Herlihy and others, is already well documented. What is less well known are the stories of ordinary policemen on the beat. Thousands of constables never had anything as dangerous or exciting as Fenian dynamiters to deal with, but that does not make their day-to-day experiences any less interesting. They walked miles in Dublin's fog-bound streets and encountered rabid dogs, visiting pickpocketing gangs from London, garrotters and ne'er-do-wells of all kinds. Their badge numbers were cited

## THE PEELER'S NOTEBOOK



Policemen were a familiar presence in Dublin courtrooms and they were often asked to give evidence. (*The Graphic*, 22 January 1881)

in contemporary newspaper reports as they hauled thieves, drunks and murderers to court and thus became an essential part of the fabric of Dublin city.

For obvious reasons, policing was an extremely important part of the British state apparatus in Ireland. The officers who walked the beat with their Tudor crown and harp insignias represented the authority of the state on a daily basis. The DMP employed approximately 1,100 officers of all ranks.<sup>1</sup> By the 1890s Irish cities such as Dublin and Belfast were the most policed in the United Kingdom, far outstripping urban centres like Birmingham, Manchester and Sheffield, each of which had populations greater than Dublin. In fact, there was one policeman for every 330 residents in Dublin, whereas the ratios

## INTRODUCTION

in Liverpool, Glasgow, Manchester and Birmingham varied from one in 480 to one in 580.<sup>2</sup> The primary reason for this high ratio of officers to people stemmed from the disturbed state of the country, and their role was evidently considered important enough for a provision to be included in the 1893 Home Rule Bill ensuring that the force would continue to be paid directly from the British Exchequer and remain answerable to the lord lieutenant.<sup>3</sup>

In some respects, the DMP appeared to be on an equal footing with its London-based counterpart, both in name and composition. The London Metropolitan Police was answerable to the Home Office rather than to the government, and likewise, the DMP reported to the chief secretary at Dublin Castle via the Office of the Police Commissioner. Part of the reason the forces had been set up like this was to offset any public fears about the development of a police state. Nevertheless, there were also key differences, for, unlike their British counterpart, the Irish police tended to be regarded as a colonial force. This was exemplified by the visit to Ireland by the colonial governor of Honduras in July 1893, who, having formally inspected the DMP and Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) at a Dublin parade ground, told them: 'In the colonies with which I have had to do, we have made this force a model both as regards your organisation as well as the happy condition of things which has brought about its efficiency and utility.'<sup>4</sup>

However, that was not how officers of the DMP viewed themselves. Partly funded from the city rates, they did not see themselves as enforcers for the Crown. They tended to be more

## THE PEELER'S NOTEBOOK

liberal in outlook than those who joined the semi-militarised RIC in the countryside, and the unmarried men who lived in local stations were, for the most part, free to discuss the events of the day such as Home Rule or Fenianism. This happened despite instructions laid down since the beginning of the force that a policeman was 'to abstain from the expression of any political or religious opinion, in any manner calculated to give offence'.<sup>5</sup> In truth, however, Robert Peel, who had become home secretary for the second time in 1828, had always been quite pragmatic on this point, telling the Irish chief secretary on 14 August 1829 that although 'all party distinctions in the police are forbidden ... the regulations in that respect cannot be too scrupulously enforced'.<sup>6</sup> That is not to say, of course, that caution was not needed. In 1843 a DMP sergeant was dismissed from the force after he attended a talk at the Rotunda to celebrate the Catholic gunpowder plot to blow up the Houses of Parliament in 1641.<sup>7</sup>

At times, ordinary constables were armed, but that was usually only a temporary measure in response to Fenian violence. Once the threat had passed, the weapons were returned to the headquarters of the various police divisions. Assistant Commissioner John Mallon, a very famous Dublin detective who became assistant commissioner in 1893, anticipated the words of the first commissioner of the Civic Guard, Michael Staines, several decades later, when he adopted the philosophy that his men should keep control through consensus rather than force. 'The only arms we carry are the baton,' he said, 'and the arms which nature has given us.'<sup>8</sup> That Mallon reached the position

## INTRODUCTION

of assistant commissioner was a great achievement for an Irish Roman Catholic.

By the 1890s the DMP was beginning to use new techniques to fight crime, such as anthropometric identification, and around 1906 fingerprinting made its first appearance. Over time, understanding of the need to preserve crime scenes increased, and whereas members of the public could trample freely over the area where a murdered person lay during the early decades of the force, towards the end of the nineteenth century these areas were cordoned off. Other techniques, such as the procuring of handwriting samples by surreptitious means (e.g., by inviting prisoners to write letters to loved ones), would be considered extremely illiberal today. However, when John Morley was appointed as Ireland's chief secretary in 1892, he readily lent his approval to such methods, adding in a memorandum to the inspector general of the RIC that those who were disposed to political outrage did not deserve the right to be cautioned by the police:

To require the police to give the caution in cases of crime before arrest would simply cripple the detective machinery and almost effectively prevent the procuring of evidence. The instinct of a detective on the commission of a crime prompts him to discreetly pump, without caution, everyone he thinks is in a position to give information, including suspected persons, and to alter this would be [the] equivalent of telling the fox that he is to be hunted the following day.<sup>9</sup>

The National Archives in Dublin holds many official reports of

## THE PEELER'S NOTEBOOK

this nature, written on heavy blue paper and submitted by those who occupied the higher echelons at Dublin Castle: the various superintendents and the assistant and chief commissioners of the DMP, as well as the chief secretary, to name but a few. But for the most part, these administrators were not given to sensationalism or hyperbole and so there is very little detail about the ordinary officers whose intelligence-gathering helped the establishment keep an eye on Victorian Dublin. Research can be an occasionally serendipitous endeavour, however, and while I worked on other projects, I encountered references to fascinating, and heretofore under-researched, aspects of policing. These include the threat posed by rabid dogs, the punishment meted out to grave robbers and the difficulties of policing foggy and sometimes dangerous streets. Some edicts, such as those prohibiting the throwing of snowballs, seem almost ludicrous today, whereas others, like the occasional arming of the force, were made in response to wider political events.

Another problem when attempting to write a book of stories about Victorian policing in Dublin is that officers very rarely put anything in print, and in particular they were strictly forbidden from sending grievances to a newspaper.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the potential for first-hand accounts is even more limited. In one or two instances, there are occasional personal glimpses into the lives of the DMP, and those accounts are published in this book. Overall, *The Peeler's Notebook* comprises a treasury of real stories about the policemen who served Dublin city, and their careers can be evaluated, not just in miles walked and streets covered, but in the lives they changed, for better or worse.

# WALKING THE BEAT

*The solitary form of a tall police constable is silhouetted against the fading light on O'Connell Bridge. Theatregoers stream past him, laughing and talking eagerly; fruit sellers, set up at their standings to benefit from the passing trade, call out rhythmically; the regular, beating heart of the city is measured in apples and oranges, nuts and sweet pears. His eyes watch the crowd, vigilant for signs of trouble.*

In *The Charwoman's Daughter*, James Stephens provides a very evocative pen portrait of how Dublin policemen went out on duty every evening during the heyday of the DMP:

Every afternoon a troop of policemen marched in solemn and majestic single file from the College Green Police Station. At regular intervals, one by one, a policeman stepped sideways from the file, adjusted his belt, touched his moustache, looked up the street and down the street for stray criminals, and condescended to the duties of his beat.<sup>1</sup>

In the beginning the men were required to wear their uniform at all times, even during their leisure hours, but later this was relaxed a little and they could wear civilian dress to go to the theatre.<sup>2</sup> Other stipulations were more onerous, however.

## THE PEELER'S NOTEBOOK

Constables were supposed to seek permission from the police commissioners to marry. Also, since the force needed to be active at all hours of the day and night, their beat was divided into three shifts. In practice this meant that there always needed to be a certain number of men in each police station. However, even those who were not working were liable to be called upon, and for that reason they needed to live near their station houses. At times they even had to sleep in their clothes so that they could deal with an emergency quickly.<sup>3</sup>

There were seven police divisions in the Dublin metropolitan area, designated A to G. In 1901 the region was expanded to accommodate new suburbs such as Glasnevin, Drumcondra and Clontarf, and each morning, runners went out from Dublin Castle to deliver orders to each of the divisional headquarters.<sup>4</sup> The only departments that covered the whole of Dublin were the detective, or G, division and the mounted horse patrol.

Policemen were issued with badge numbers that matched their division, and when they were on duty, they were not supposed to walk at more than three miles an hour so that they could be of most help to members of the public. Strolling at this measured regulation pace, they covered about ten miles per day and got to know all the characters and buildings of note in their areas. Their beat book told them the correct order in which they should police the streets and the time allowed on each corner, as well as the locations of turncocks and fire engines. If a policeman had to leave his beat to take a prisoner to a nearby station, he was supposed to inform a colleague, who would then take his place.<sup>5</sup> In principle the men were not

## WALKING THE BEAT

allowed to drink on duty (although they sometimes did so), and they were not supposed to engage in idle talk. On 1 June 1844 DMP constable John Moore reported a police sergeant in his official notebook for ‘holding unnecessary conversation with a man named Dwyer ... at Clarke’s Bridge for 4 minutes’. As a result, the sergeant was demoted to the rank of first-class constable, which meant a salary reduction of five shillings per week.<sup>6</sup>



Strangers attracted a lot of notice in Dublin. When Harriett Neill, a wealthy landowner, was shot and killed by an agrarian gang at her home in Brighton Road, Rathgar, on 27 May 1872, the gunmen were quickly found and arrested. (*Illustrated Police News*, 8 June 1872)

## THE PEELER'S NOTEBOOK

Dublin was quite a small city and strangers were easy to spot.<sup>7</sup> With a population of just a quarter of a million people, visitors stood out, and if they acted suspiciously their movements were quickly relayed to the authorities at the Castle. In January 1898 the police of B division reported that ‘two suspicious characters who were loitering at Foster Place inquired ... the name of [that] building ... what the equestrian statue in College Green represented; the high column in Sackville Street and what the needle-like column in the Phoenix Park was’.<sup>8</sup>

So many things came under the purview of policemen in Dublin – illegal gambling and cockfights, pickpocketing and petty thievery, dog licences, drunkenness and cases of furious driving. Constables were also supposed to do as much as they could while out on the beat to suppress begging. *The Irish Constable's Guide* (1895) urged them ‘when on patrol or beat duty ... [to] make special inquiries about vagrants who may have been begging in the locality’.<sup>9</sup> Some of the rules seem quite archaic by today's standards. For instance, the *Guide* urged fines for ‘any person who shall fly any kite or play at any game, or make



A traffic constable at a busy city junction, 1886. (Courtesy of Alamy Stock Photo)

## WALKING THE BEAT

or use any slide upon ice or snow, on any public road or in any street of a town, to the danger of the passengers'.<sup>10</sup>

James Stephens wrote the following about a constable on traffic duty: 'He knows all the tram-drivers who go by, and his nicely graduated wink rewards the glances of the rubicund, jolly drivers of the hackneys and the decayed jehus with purple faces and dismal hopefulness who drive sepulchral cabs for some reason which has no acquaintance with profit; nor are the ladies and gentlemen who saunter past foreign to his encyclopaedic eye.'<sup>11</sup> There were no traffic lights, so a police presence at every busy street junction in the city was essential.

Jarveys were often appropriated by policemen, particularly in urgent cases when they needed to take people to hospital. They could also be commandeered by constables when they needed to get to the scene of a riot quickly.<sup>12</sup> The DMP was put in charge of the carriage office where horse-drawn taxis were licensed, and punishment was meted out to cabmen who did not pay their licences or who drove too fast. In 1899 the licence of a car driver named John Bergin of Boyne Street was revoked and he was sentenced to hard labour for 'cruelty to his children'. He had whipped his two sons 'in a manner likely to [cause] unnecessary suffering or injury' and when the case came to court the police magistrate said that he had treated his son John with a 'devilish savagery'. His licence had previously been revoked for assaulting a constable, drunkenness and furious driving, which had caused damage to property.<sup>13</sup>

In October 1839 a woman named Mary MacDonnell brought a complaint against a carman from Henrietta Place. En

## THE PEELER'S NOTEBOOK

route to Kingstown (modern-day Dún Laoghaire), he insisted on stopping at a public house in Beggar's Bush for a glass of whiskey, which he drank. At Kingstown Church he became abusive and took the linchpin out of one of the wheels in his car, which rendered it immobile. However, when Mrs MacDonnell, who was a friend of the undersecretary, Thomas Drummond, called in to the local police station, she got no help. She later made an official statement which makes for amusing reading:

The policeman told her to tell Mr Drummond to 'kiss his arse' and she might do the same ... The same policeman shoved informant into the street and informant is now unable to proceed on her journey from the treatment she received, especially from the carman.<sup>14</sup>

There was a serious postscript to this incident. Magistrate Lynam ordered the head constable at Kingstown to 'parade' all of his constables at his quarters 'in order to ascertain the individual who conducted himself so'.<sup>15</sup> The authorities did not tolerate bad manners or discourtesy.

One of the more colourful arrests made by the DMP took place one Sunday in April 1859 when the entire detective division descended on No. 7 Essex Street to break up a cockfighting tournament. The cocks were put into a ring, booted and spurred, and wagers were put down by the various 'fanciers'. For months, the house had been a source of annoyance to local residents, but the owner had taken great care to let nobody in who had not been introduced or did not hold a shilling ticket.

## WALKING THE BEAT

Prior to the tournament, the police suddenly became 'most devout' and went to twelve o'clock mass at the nearby church of St Michael and St John:

When mass had terminated, the gimlets who were in coloured clothes came out of the church in the midst of the congregation and, making a short turn, presented themselves in front of the Olympic circus. Before any alarm could be given, Superintendent Ryan and his men had gained admission and, in a few minutes, stood in the centre of the lists, where 37 individuals and Mr Ruth were enjoying a hard-fought rubber of 5s 10d. Nothing could exceed the consternation of the proprietor and the devoted 37 and, finding themselves trapped, various attempts were made at a cut and run, but escape was hopeless and they had to submit.<sup>16</sup>

The way in which policemen walked the beat reflected Victorian sensibilities. Only experienced officers walked the main thoroughfares such as Sackville Street, Dame Street or Grafton Street because they were considered knowledgeable enough to assist members of the 'quality' if they needed assistance, whether it was help in the event of a crime or directions to landmarks of interest. That left the new recruits or 'Johnny Raws' to patrol the dangerous laneways and backstreets of the city.

The area around Hardwicke Street was particularly notorious. At the rear of the nearby Temple Street Children's Hospital, founded in 1879, there was a piggery, a forge and horse stables interspersed with overcrowded tenement houses, and during the 1890s residents of Gardiner Row, Gardiner

## THE PEELER'S NOTEBOOK

Street and Temple Street (including the doctors of the hospital) signed a petition that they then sent to the chief commissioner of the DMP, informing him about the behaviour of the local inhabitants:

The screaming, fighting and drunken brawls which are going on in it every night are an intolerable annoyance to the persons residing in the surrounding streets. We, the inhabitants of the above-mentioned streets, are unable to open our back windows on account of the filthy and blasphemous language which would then become audible, and pollute the ears of our wives and families. This annoyance is worse on Saturday when the drunken inhabitants of the Court are allowed to issue from it to the adjacent Streets, and disturb the neighbourhood until a very late hour without interference from the Police.<sup>17</sup>

The petitioners sought protection from the DMP and wanted them to make arrests. Failing that, they asked that enough officers be put on duty to deal with disturbances. It was understandable why a young officer, armed with just a few months' experience and a truncheon, might feel daunted going into such areas alone.

Unlike their semi-militarised counterparts in the RIC, the DMP did not give guns to their officers 'because of the rarity of homicides and serious personal violence in Dublin compared to the countryside'.<sup>18</sup> In response to the Fenian threat of the late 1860s, a ten-ounce truncheon appeared on the streets, but such weapons were useless against more sophisticated weaponry. The first police officer to be fatally shot on duty was Charles

## WALKING THE BEAT

O'Neill in 1866. When an armed detective named Clarke went in search of the killer, he was almost shot as he stopped a man for questioning in the damp quarters of a tenement hallway. Fortunately he was too quick for the would-be assailant and, seizing the gun, told him that 'he would send the contents thro' him if he attempted to resist'.<sup>19</sup>

In spite of the city coroner's recommendations, made in May 1866 and November 1867, that the police force needed to be armed, this was difficult to implement on ideological and practical grounds, and in August 1868 Conservative MP for Armagh Mr John Vance cautioned that:

However well justified a policeman may consider himself in firing, the act with all its accompanying circumstances, whether the result be attended by loss of life or otherwise, must become the subject of legal investigation. It therefore behoves those who may be placed in such a situation to be well prepared to prove that they acted with becoming humanity, caution and prudence and that they were compelled by necessity alone to have recourse to their arms.<sup>20</sup>

Several policemen were shot in 1866 and 1867, and for a short time after each incident, constables going on the beat were equipped with firearms and sent out in pairs. However, this was quite a short-lived measure, and the weapons, mostly seized from Fenian suspects, were outmoded and often unreliable.

One of the biggest hazards faced by policemen on the beat was the city's myriad narrow lanes and alleys. For instance, the area behind Aungier Street, stretching as far as St Stephen's

## THE PEELER'S NOTEBOOK

Green, was a veritable warren of backstreets in which a red-light district of twenty-five brothels did a roaring trade, alongside six unlicensed public houses. In 'Monto', another red-light district on the northside of the city just off Great Britain (now Parnell) Street, underground passages led from the pubs into the brothels so the clientele could pass between the two undisturbed, and police raids brought constables into many dark corners, including the holds of ships on the River Liffey and opium dens.<sup>21</sup>

Their searches led them over walls into pig yards, down blind alleys and across stables, and they never really knew what they might come across. In August 1840 two policemen were beaten up by a retired army captain who galloped through Marlborough Street during the early hours crying 'fire, fire!'<sup>22</sup> On 28 July 1842 a destitute and starving woman broke a gas lamp on Thomas Street just so she could be arrested.<sup>23</sup> In August 1855 a twelve-year-old girl was discovered by police chained to an iron bar by her waist in a coal hole on Capel Street. She had been shackled so long by her father that she was unable to walk.<sup>24</sup> There was seemingly no end to the things a constable might see while on the beat.

The police may have lost sight of and rejoined their quarry under the shadow of high Georgian houses that backed onto small cottages, or across the cracked stones of moss-covered, time-worn courtyards. My wife's grandfather, Dick Fitzgerald, lived in Bow Bridge near Cromwell's Quarters in Kilmainham. Dick recalled that on one occasion he crept into a nearby yard with a young 'accomplice' to steal eggs from some

## WALKING THE BEAT

chickens. With the first part of their mission accomplished, they sat on the landing, from which they had a good view of two policemen standing on a nearby street corner.<sup>25</sup> The local children nicknamed these two stalwart officers 'Thunder' and 'Lightning'. Thunder was a portly sort, but Lightning could run for Ireland. The two lads dropped the eggs on their heads. Dick remembered that Lightning chased him through the streets for two hours.

Seamus Marken, who lived near Moore Street market, recalls another legendary chase:

At that time, there was a big derelict tenement house in Little Denmark Street. There may even have been two, for that matter. People had pulled up the floorboards for firewood. At the back of it, there was a huge waste ground called the Ouler where there had been buildings of some kind, but in my day it was all flattened. We used to go and dig holes, make trenches and play war in it. When we'd be chased by the police for playing football or for jeering a copper, we'd have to run like hell through these markets. Once we'd get across the Ouler, we'd go through the tenement. You had to sort of hug the wall with the other foot on the joist. Then we were out into Denmark Street, Chapel Lane, Parnell Street and away.

Most policemen might chase you as far as the Ouler, but they wouldn't bother going further than that. One time, one policeman thought he was good, so he kept on chasing us. Of course, we ran through the building. He ran after us but fell on the joists. He started screaming. We had to get a man in Denmark Street to go in and get an ambulance to take him away. He could have been destroyed.<sup>26</sup>

## THE PEELER'S NOTEBOOK

Once a policeman had made an arrest, he needed to escort his prisoner to a local police station, but that was not always so easily done. Attacks on prisoner escorts were commonplace, and stone-throwing mobs often fell upon the constabulary, sometimes in gangs of 300 or more. Sticks and stones were used and, on extreme occasions, bricks, kettles, old basins and other objects were flung out of tenement windows.<sup>27</sup> Not all prisoners were unhappy to be arrested, however. Destitute people could look forward to a meal while they were in custody, as well as a roof over their heads.

In 1846 a Wicklow man named Lacy was arrested at a shop in Bride Street when he handed over a filthy crown-piece from the time of King George III. Because the coin was so old and worn, the shopkeeper accused him of counterfeiting. Lacy called for help from a passing constable, who took a dim view of the transaction and escorted him to Chancery Lane Station. Afterwards, a local silversmith was able to prove that the coin was in fact genuine, but the biggest surprise came when Lacy was freed and his wife arrived to meet him. She was delighted he had been locked up because that Saturday night an armed gang of agrarian activists, or 'Ribbonmen', had arrived at his home to kill him. Had he not been mistakenly arrested, he might have died at their hands.<sup>28</sup>

The station house to which Lacy was taken was a large and elaborate complex that featured a parade ground, coal cellars and office. In 1862 it was joined to the newly built Clarke's Court police barracks. Other station houses had been modernised prior to the establishment of the DMP. In 1828,

## WALKING THE BEAT

for instance, an architect, assigned to make improvements to College Street Station, noted that it was 'rather in a precarious state' because the adjoining houses had been demolished, and he added that there was 'want of a room for transacting the public business'.<sup>29</sup> By the 1840s, however, many of the stations had cells for prisoners with ventilation in the roof and sufficient accommodation for the men, including a mess hall and kitchen. Responsibility for keeping them clean usually fell to an old charwoman who was sufficiently aged that she could not corrupt the morals of the constables.

By the 1880s telephonic communication had been established between the various police stations, as well as with the chief secretary's office at Dublin Castle.<sup>30</sup> Other innovations followed, such as the purchase of typewriting machines in 1889.<sup>31</sup> Such technology helped the police authorities keep pace with a growing population and, as the city expanded beyond the confines of the Royal and Grand canals, deploy men where they were needed most. For instance, the telephone was crucially important during the Burgh Quay disaster of 1905, and again in September 1913, when the Castle needed accurate information about the movements of rioters. However, these changes complemented, rather than replaced, good, old-fashioned police work and when an officer was faced with a dangerous or unusual situation, the most important tools at his disposal were courage, intelligence and a good sense of humour.

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Modern dramas tend to portray nineteenth-century society as quaint, yet familiar. In reality, the Victorian era was strange and thoroughly unsettling. Policemen on the beat had to contend with a labyrinth of narrow alleyways and a host of unusual dangers including rabid dogs, garrotte-wielding criminals, poisonous gases and an ever-present fog.

Established at the dawn of this era, the lives of Dublin's Metropolitan Police were punctuated by running battles with violent tenement mobs, Fenian rebels, street gangs and self-proclaimed kings. *The Peeler's Notebook* comprises a miscellany of accounts selected from archival and newspaper sources. It casts fresh light on this forgotten era of Irish policing and brings to light fascinating stories from Dublin's history.



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