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Faculty Research Note

Andrew Harris

Professor Andrew Harris of the History Department can best be described as a criminal justice historian, which makes him kind of a modern day scholarly sleuth. His area of research is the transformation of criminal justice in 18th and 19th century England, with particular emphasis on studying how the City of London made changes in the organization and operation of its police force. In pursuing his Ph.D. from Stanford University, Professor Harris traveled to London and immersed himself in the City of London archives, where he began researching the reform efforts made by the leading citizens of that era. Now at Bridgewater, Professor Harris continues his examination of British criminal justice.

Professor Harris is interested in determining why the citizens of London supported changes in policing from a localized ward-centered system to a more centralized city system. What he found was that legal reformers became increasingly wary of the discretion inherent in local policing, a discretion which implied less than perfectly rationalized enforcement of the law. For many citizens, discretion, flexibility and local participation in regulating the police had provided stability in criminal justice. In the early 19th century, though, these same qualities looked irrational and anachronistic. As propertied citizens increasingly distrusted the poor in the wake of both economic and political revolution, they also distrusted placing too much authority in the hands of those poorer residents who inevitably served as officers. The solution agreed upon was to bring more rationality to the criminal justice system. This push for rationality took the form of a centralization of police functions.

Professor Harris documents the reform effort during the period of increased democratization in England in the 1830s. In his research he found that even though the City of London moved to a more centralized system of policing, the transformation was not as significant as many believed at the time. New constables for the City of London were actually recruited from the existing ward police, new station houses were often built on the existing sites of local watch houses and new uniforms for the city police legitimated a criminal justice system that no longer directly linked to local communities.

But while Professor Harris points out that reforms of policing in London were not wholly transformational, they nevertheless did have an impact on the criminal justice system. The citizens of London did give up power to define on the local level what the law meant to them. Legitimacy deriving from local control gave way to a legitimacy produced by the appearance of new kinds of rationality and efficiency.

As a result of his research on the transformation of policing and criminal justice in 18th and 19th century London, Professor Harris has presented a series of conference papers and he is currently working on a transformation project of his own. He hopes to have his dissertation transformed into a book which will discuss these reform efforts in England. Because policing and the efforts to change the manner in which the law is enforced in societies are topics with broad interest, it is likely that his study of the London reform movement will appear in book form.

When not involved in his research, Professor Harris is a busy instructor in the History Department. He regularly teaches a two course survey of British history along with a course in 19th century Europe. In the spring, 1999 semester he will be teaching a new colloquium course on Crime, Law and Society in 18th and 19th century England, which will allow him to bring his considerable expertise into the classroom.

As to his future research interests, Professor Harris would like to continue exploring the ideals and realities of the law, focusing on the meaning and actuality of 18th and 19th century English juries. In many respects this is a natural offshoot of his study of policing and criminal justice and should allow him to develop a broader understanding of how people in England interacted with the legal system. Needless to say, Professor Harris is excited about his existing research and the prospects for delving into a new area of history. Like most of his faculty colleagues at Bridgewater, Professor Harris is a dedicated scholar whose passion for his work is in evidence everyday in the classroom.