

Thin Blue: The Unwritten Rules of Policing South Africa by Jonny Steinberg (Jonathan Ball) R123

Street Blues: The Experiences of a Reluctant Policeman by Andrew Brown (Zebra) R143
1 March 2009

Despite the overlap in titles, these two books adopt very different perspectives on their subject. Steinberg's book is analytical, dispassionate, interested less in the police as human beings than in their sociological function. Brown's book engages at a much more personal level with the business of policing and the men and women who make it their business.

The difference is a natural consequence of the different angles of vision of the two men. Steinberg spent, by his own count, "about 350 hours riding along in the patrol vans of the South African Police Service." If he developed a personal relationship with any of his driver/guides, he doesn't say so; his business is to record the interaction between policed and policed as he sees it, and to draw his conclusions. He thanks any number of institutions, fellow-academics and publishers, but doesn't acknowledge the police force that gave him access to his subject.

Brown, by contrast, is a reservist sergeant in the SAPS, and has over ten years spent many of his weekend nights patrolling the streets of Cape Town with his colleagues, the permanent police force. His book is dedicated to "The Men and Women of the Mowbray Police Station, Cape Town."

A more significant difference even than these is in the areas covered by the two books. Steinberg's patrols were for the most part, except for his last chapter, undertaken in the black townships of Johannesburg. Brown served in the police station of one of Cape Town's southern suburbs, a mixed, mainly white and coloured area integrated with metropolitan Cape Town. The differences are immense and illuminating. ."

Steinberg provides us, perhaps, with the key to these differences. His thesis, derived from Egon Bittner's work on policing, is that "The most important precondition for policing in a democratic society is the consent of the general population to be policed." He shows that in the vast majority of instances in the townships, this is not the case (the exception is domestic violence, when the police "come to a scene because civilians have called them there"). He traces this lack of faith in the police back to the struggle days, when the police were driven out of the townships; according to him the police have not regained the respect they lost when they were seen as the agents of a repressive regime: "Each and every police officer who walked or drove through the townships during this country's transition to democracy bore the marks of history: the history of what the police meant in general, and of what he himself was doing a few years earlier."

In Brown's book, on the other hand, the police, though often resented, are by and large welcomed: in a sense they are patrolling a large domestic area in which the inhabitants look to the police to sort out their differences and mishaps. Here the political legacy of the police also seems to be less bitter than in the townships. Indeed, Brown provides an interesting instance of the changed perspective on the police: he was himself, as a student activist, arrested and manhandled by the police force that he has now joined; some of his present colleagues were his bitter adversaries in the eighties. He works side by side with an admired colleague who turns out to be the loving daughter of the most brutal of apartheid's cops.

It follows that Brown's book is marginally more up-beat than Stenberg's. Steinberg brilliantly anatomises a failed police force: in the distrust of civilians for the police, he sees an obstacle to effective policing. All that is possible is at most a kind of charade, in which police and policed act out a wary pretence of going through the motions of policing, with neither party losing face. Clearly, the business of crime prevention or detection is secondary to the preservation of some sort of self-respect on the part of both police and policed.

The picture Brown paints is by no means rosy, but it is more hopeful, in that he concentrates on the human qualities of endurance and initiative that even the most corrupt cop must possess in order to survive. He notes that from 2000 to 2005, 506 police officers committed suicide; he is fascinated and impressed with "the necessity for an ordinary police officer, on any normal day at work, to make a multitude of instantaneous and complex decisions." As a lawyer, he is intrigued by the fact that "police officers work at the very point where theoretical law meets human practicality." Police officers being human, all too human, it is not surprising that theoretical law does not always reign supreme. In Brown's approach there is also room for more humour than Steinberg's more soberly argued method allows him.

Different as they are, these two books complement each other illuminatingly. Ordinary citizens exasperated at the apparent inability of the police to cope with crime, may not be consoled by these books, but they will at least have a better understanding of the nature and magnitude of the problem. Both writers have, in their different ways, researched their subjects intimately, and both write with skill and flair. Both should be read.