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Herbert Dowbiggin and the New Vision of Colonial Policing

During his twenty-four-year tenure as Inspector General of the Ceylon Police, Herbert Dowbiggin introduced considerable reforms into the force. As an internationally renowned authority in policing, Dowbiggin's vision of colonial policing inspired reform throughout the British Empire, and beyond. He was often called to "hot spots" throughout the empire to recommend improvements that would prevent anti-colonial uprising and make policing more effective. Two of the key tenets of Dowbiggin's policing theory were first, closer integration of the police within the communities they served, and second, greater use of forensic technologies to prevent, detect, and investigate crime. According to Dowbiggin, only a combination of both could result in the effective reduction of criminality.

This paper explores the tension between these two tenets in Dowbiggin's theory of colonial policing. Whereas the former built on, and fostered stronger bonds between state and society, the latter relied on surveillance and the passiveness of the policed, thus fostering alienation rather than trust. Furthermore, whereas the former sought to align colonial policing with England's domestic model, the latter departed from the policing methods utilized in England, allowing the state to collect and use information that would have been seen as a violation of the subject's rights at home. By tracing the tension between these two tenets, and how Dowbiggin sought to reconcile them, this paper provides historical context to some of the pressing current questions on the relationship between policing and society.