“Leaving at His Own Request: 
Voluntary Resignations of Constables from English Police Forces, 1900-1939”

The working-class men joining an English Borough police force between 1900 and 1939 had to survive lengthy screening. They had to pass medical and educational examinations, submit letters of character, and wait for an opening. If hired, men attended training school and spent a year on probation. Only a tiny percentage of men became fully-fledged constables. More men were weeded out by their inability to submit to the obedience required of them and others could not withstand the physical demands of the job. Outside of these cases, a significant minority of qualified constables left the police voluntarily before reaching retirement age. Reasons for leaving fell into two categories. First, men in their first years of service discovered that they did not care for or could not cope with police life. Second, older men left for domestic reasons. Families disliked constantly shifting schedules, parents wanted sons to enter family business, or promotions did not occur. Superior officers of these discontented constables did everything they could to dissuade men from leaving but every year capable policemen quit due to discontent with the police life or better opportunities elsewhere. This paper examines patterns of voluntary resignation in the city forces of Birmingham, Liverpool and Manchester, making use of internal police records. Definite numbers are hard to pin down. Birmingham kept a resignation register covering 1930 to 1951; voluntary resignations in other forces appear sporadically in report books and minutes. The Birmingham register showed a steady if small stream of experienced men leaving, often for no specific reason or simply “by his own accord.” The force may have considered them to be good policemen but the men had other plans for their futures.