Contrary to popular belief, Ireland was a very loosely administered and poorly policed country in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Until 1814, when the first unit of the Police Preservation Force was formed, the policing of rural Ireland was very haphazard and ineffective. Many parts of the country had no police at all. Some districts had the baronial police or 'Barnies', as they were popularly called. Local magistrates had the right to appoint the constables to this force, but these appointments were often made on a patronage basis: the magistrates appointed their servants, retainers and supporters. This generally meant an untrained, part-time, poorly-motivated force, many of whose members were ill-suited to, or unfit for, police work. The low standing of the force can be seen from the fact that the military often ignored it when they came into an area.

From the 1760s, agrarian disturbances and uprisings were an intermittent feature of eighteenth century life. From the beginning to the middle of the nineteenth century, they had a more or less continuous, slow-burning existence. As a consequence, it became increasingly clear to the authorities in Dublin Castle that a properly trained police force was required to deal with the agrarian insurgents and other law-breaking activities in rural Ireland. It was for this reason that the P.P.E. was set up and later, in 1822, the more successful County Constabulary. The men who led this early police force played a historic role: they laid the foundations of the Irish police system, establishing police practices and codes of conduct for the future. One of the most notable of the early police officers was Richard Willcocks.

It is as an agent of Dublin Castle that we first came in contact with Willcocks. In 1813, he was sent into Westmeath to investigate and report on the causes of agrarian disturbances in that county. This outbreak had been sparked off early in 1813, and had run like a gorse-fire through the Midlands, then crept across provincial borders into Munster and spread as far south as Limerick and Waterford. This was the Carders' insurrection, so called because those involved used a comb for carding wool to scrape the skin off the backs of those who ignored or transgressed their agrarian code of rules and regulations. In his report, Willcocks said that the entire lower class in the county and some of the farmers had been sworn into the combination, many by force and through fear. Some of his informants told him that those involved used a comb for carding wool to scrape the skin off the backs of those who ignored or transgressed their agrarian code of rules and regulations. In his report, Willcocks said that the entire lower class in the county and some of the farmers had been sworn into the combination, many by force and through fear. Some of his informants told him that those involved used a comb for carding wool to scrape the skin off the backs of those who ignored or transgressed their agrarian code of rules and regulations. In his report, Willcocks said that the entire lower class in the county and some of the farmers had been sworn into the combination, many by force and through fear. Some of his informants told him that those involved used a comb for carding wool to scrape the skin off the backs of those who ignored or transgressed their agrarian code of rules and regulations. In his report, Willcocks said that the entire lower class in the county and some of the farmers had been sworn into the combination, many by force and through fear. Some of his informants told him that those involved used a comb for carding wool to scrape the skin off the backs of those who ignored or transgressed their agrarian code of rules and regulations.
Willcocks as chief magistrate. Willcocks chose Cashel as his headquarters, whence he sent out mounted patrols to police the roads at night. Robert Peel, the chief secretary, was pleased with the force's initial success. He wrote: 'Although the police bill has been but a few weeks in operation, the effect is already such as to justify the most sanguine expectation of its ultimate success." But, as time was to show, Peel's expectations were premature. The tranquility was seasonal, not terminal. The Whiteboys were premature. The tranquility was also under pressure from other quarters. Lord Donoughmore, a prominent Castle magistrate into Tipperary, where they did not know the people or the countryside. The Peace Preservation Act was because the act had a penal clause. Willcocks was free of religious sectarianism. In evidence before a select committee he said: 'I am satisfied that I have raised myself above eight hundred police and constables and I never asked a man what was his religious profession.'

In 1821, Major Willcocks and another police magistrate, Major George Warburton, reported on the state of Co. Limerick. We know from other sources that Warburton was conservative and traditional in his thinking, so that it is possible to distinguish Willcock's contribution from his. The following are a few of the more interesting points made in the report. The tenants of the Courtenay estate, where the insurrection of 1821 began, were said to be 'very unfairly and tyrannically treated'. Unemployment and a long tradition of lawlessness and disorder were seen as root causes of the disturbances. And it was noted that the lower classes think that 'the laws were only framed to benefit the wealthy and to hold themselves in bondage'.

In October, 1822, Willcocks was appointed inspector of police, under the Constabulary Bill, for the counties of Cork, Kerry, Tipperary and Waterford. And, in January, 1825, the government formally appointed him inspector-general for Munster. This was the high point of his career. And it must have given him pleasure to be able to report on the exceptional peace in Munster. In a characteristic comment, he remarked: 'what renders it still more gratifying is that the relinquishment of outrage had not been effected by coercive measures but gradually attained by legitimate causes.' At best, this is only partly true, as all the disturbed areas of Munster had been proclaimed under the Insurrection Act, saturated with police and military, and all the repressive measures available to the state brought to bear on the people. But it is of interest for its revelation of Willcock's thinking. It shows him to be a believer in law and order and not in force. He was a pioneering, professional policeman, who set a high standard for those who followed in his footsteps.

Sources
2. Ibid. p.75.
3. Ibid. p.78.
4. Select Committee of House of Lords, 1824. p.86.
5. Select Committee of House of Commons, 1825, p.950.