


# The life and good times of Captain Beaujolais

Review by Tony Judge

**Not for the Faint Hearted by John Stevens**  
(Weidenfeld & Nicolson) £18.95

 Of the 21 men who have been commissioners of Police of the Metropolis, the Met, since 1829, a few deserve the accolade of 'outstanding', rather more have been excellent, and an unspecified number, at least in my impertinent opinion, have either been mediocre or downright disasters. I would put Sir John, now Baron Stevens, in the 'excellent' group, with a little more luck, he would have been up there with the great ones.

Not that Mr Stevens has not had more than his fair share of good fortune. The adopted son of a prosperous civil aviation pioneer, he had all the qualities of a Mills and Boon hero, tall and handsome, athletic and adventurous, with enough of a ruthless streak to pursue his goals with singular determination. If it took him nearly forty years to get the top job, his career is studded with achievements, starting from his days on the beat at Tottenham Court Road, where his thief-taking abilities earned him the nickname of "Swiftly" Stevens. He was a natural for the CID.

His book is revealing about life in the CID in the 1960s, when a drinking culture was rife, even considered to be essential. Stevens cheerfully admits that his liking for red wine has earned him another nickname – Captain Beaujolais. Within a short time, he joined the elite Flying Squad, later to be immortalised by Regan and

Carter in *The Sweeney*. His team was dubbed 'The Fighting Six' because after a few drinks its members were prone to fight each other rather than the crooks. Their vehicles included black taxis, and the drivers were not averse to picking up fares when they were not required for police work.

Mr Stevens was turned down twice when he applied for the Special Course at the Police College, which would have put him on a fast track to the top, but within his first seven years he reached detective inspector rank. He did get to Bramshill as a member of the six months Inspectors' Course, where he developed a taste for the academic life, and at the age of 34 he commenced a three-year law course at Leicester, thanks to a Bramshill Scholarship.

As a detective superintendent, Stevens took charge of the CID at Heathrow, where his major headaches were terrorism and light-fingered baggage handlers. Years later, as commissioner, he was to have a famous row with David Blunkett because he had called in the army for a show of strength at Heathrow. This centred on whether the army was using tanks, as Blunkett alleged, or armoured vehicles.

After spells in ACPO posts in Hampshire and Cambridgeshire, Mr Stevens became chief constable of Northumbria Police, where he took a firm line

against young criminals who were terrorising run down housing estates. His hands-on approach to police leadership earned him the respect of a force which was badly in need of change, and under Stevens, change was what it got.


While at Cambridge, and afterwards at Northumberland, Mr Stevens spent long periods in Northern Ireland, conducting a mammoth (and still ongoing) inquiry into allegations of collusion between the security forces and terrorists. He and his hand picked team faced obstruction and hostility at every turn, culminating in an arson attack on the team's control room in the heart of the heavily guarded police authority headquarters.

After two years as an HMI, Mr Stevens returned to the Met as deputy commissioner. In February 2000 he succeeded Sir Paul Condon, defeating Ian Blair in the final selection. His immediate agenda was to implement the Macpherson Report, and to restore the morale of a force that had been devastated by the Inquiry's verdict that the Met was institutionally racist.

Naturally, the book deals with Stevens' relationship with David Blunkett, who famously issued (or did not issue) an ultimatum to him to cut crime in six months or be sacked. Whereas Stevens had worked amicably with Jack Straw, he found to his acute disappointment that Blunkett was not a



man he felt could be trusted, and always when meeting the Home Secretary made sure that he had a witness with him.

Stevens emerges from this engagingly frank and often entertaining book as a dedicated and very human police officer, never afraid to laugh at himself. His concern for the welfare and integrity of the service shines through and it is not difficult to understand why he was rightly dubbed "a copper's copper" in the media, which he was adroit in handling. The book also reveals the sacrifices that are required of all police officers who aim for high command, sacrifices which fall upon families more than the officers themselves. The unsung heroes of the John Stevens story are his wife and children, and this he handsomely  acknowledges.

