Document généré le 1 jan. 2025 17:50

Urban History Review
Revue d'histoire urbaine

URBAN HISTORY REVIEW
REVUE D'HISTOIRE URBAINE

Wilson, Christopher P. *Cop Knowledge: Police Power and Cultural Narrative in Twentieth-Century America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000. Pp. xii, 281. Black-and-white illustrations, index. US$16.00 (paper)

Greg Marquis

Volume 29, numéro 1, october 2000

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1016430ar
DOI : https://doi.org/10.7202/1016430ar

Aller au sommaire du numéro

Éditeur(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (imprimé)
1918-5138 (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer ce compte rendu

Marquis, G. (2000). Compte rendu de [Wilson, Christopher P. *Cop Knowledge: Police Power and Cultural Narrative in Twentieth-Century America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000. Pp. xii, 281. Black-and-white illustrations, index. US$16.00 (paper)]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, *29*(1), 68–68. https://doi.org/10.7202/1016430ar

All Rights Reserved © Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine, 2000

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d’auteur. L’utilisation des services d’Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d’utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/

érudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l’Université de Montréal, l’Université Laval et l’Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

https://www.erudit.org/fr/

Wilson, Christopher P. *Cop Knowledge: Police Power and Cultural Narrative in Twentieth-Century America.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000. Pp. xii, 281. Black-and-white illustrations, index. US$16.00 (paper).

Christopher Wilson is a professor of English, not urban history, yet his interest in cultural representation has produced a study of "police stories" that will benefit urban studies. Previously he worked on American literature, news reporting, nonfiction, and popular culture. In a series of case studies ranging from the Dora Clark affair of 1896 to Boston's Copney-Grant murders of 1991, Wilson illustrates the complex relationship between the police, the media, and mass culture. The focus is on big-city policing, journalism, and popular culture, specifically in centres such as Los Angeles, New York, Chicago and Boston. Police stories have functioned as "narratives of power" that, even in the case of liberal journalists, tend to allow the police to construct the "reality" of crime and criminality. At times this influence has been direct, such as the LAPD's vetting of scripts for *Dragnet*. But in most cases the influences have been indirect, low profile and more powerful.

Readers are warned that the approach is experimental and the theoretical framework somewhat imprecise. But Wilson attempts to pursue three broad questions: the material forms of police power over the last century; the impact of "cop knowledge" on media depictions of police, crime, and urban society; and the challenges for "outsiders" working on and among the police.

The sources of *Cop Knowledge* include popular journalism, from the early twenteth-century muckrakers to the tabloids of the 1980s, political and academic writing including the works of Reiss, Fogelson, Skolnick, and Monkkonen, and fictional works such as the book and film *The Naked City* and the bestselling 1970s novels of Joseph Wambaugh. Supposedly empirical criminological studies such as James Q. Wilson's *Thinking about Crime*, which signalled and abetted the neoconservative criminal justice policies of the 1980s, can also be considered "cultural storytelling and political rhetoric." And so can popular America television programs such as *Homicide*.

Wilson opens with the Clark affair, which pitted writer Stephen Crane against the "reformed" New York police under commissioner Teddy Roosevelt. Crane, then investigating the city's Tenderloin district, emerged as the chivalrous protector of a woman arrested for soliciting for purposes of prostitution. The second chapter discusses the emergence of the "police procedural" story, which coincided with the second wave of American police reform as promoted by August Vollmer and O. W. Wilson. In these stories, epitomized in the film *The Naked City* (1948), crimes are solved methodically by white-collar detectives. The film was based on a book by an early tabloid journalist, Mark Hellinger, predecessor to populist urban realists such as Jimmy Breslin. The suggestion is that journalists/authors who have worked in the police milieu legitimize police authority through semi-documentary detective stories and reporting.

Wilson next examines the "antiacademic police ethnographies" of Wambaugh, an ex-cop whose fiction reflects the besieged nature of 1960s policing. In *The New Centurions* and *The Blue Knight,* the aggressive policies of the LAPD are endorsed, and minorities, gays, protestors, and liberals are excoriated. The heroes are blue-collar "white ethnics," mostly Roman Catholic (a point the author raises more than once), relying on an artisanal approach to law enforcement that is hostile towards not only "civilians," but also misguided police commanders and their political masters. Wambaugh's television series *Police Story* attempted to build sympathy for the ordinary mobile patrol officer.

Despite the upheavals of the 1960s and declining police prestige, the media and cultural industries retained their fascination with "cop knowledge," especially when it involves murder. A series of "reality" best-sellers on urban crime, easily serialized for television, were produced by journalists who reiterated the police message that crime was influenced not by social-economic factors such as de-industrialization or racism, but individual pathology. Wilson also discusses the strategy of community policing, which may have served as a cover story for a more aggressive response to street, drug, and youth crime.

This book is both engaging and challenging. *Cop Knowledge* is accessible and thought provoking but also difficult in places for the non-specialist. The endnotes provide some assistance to readers unfamiliar with the theories and terminology of cultural criticism. This caveat aside, the study is valuable for reminding us that historical and contemporary accounts of urban crime and policing should never be taken at face value. And we should be careful not to overly enjoy those *Hill Street Blues* reruns.

Greg Marquis
Department of History and Politics
University of New Brunswick

Crossick, Geoffrey, and Serge Jaumain, eds., *Cathedrals of Commerce: The European Department Store, 1850–1939.* Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999. Pp. xvii, 326. Black-and-white illustrations, index. US$99.95.

Over the last couple of decades, Geoffrey Crossick has co-edited a series of works, often with Heinz-Gerhard Haupt, that have largely defined the study of the urban lower middle class. Their *Shopkeepers and Master Artisans in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, in particular, is a seminal work in the social history of nineteenth-century small-business people. And now, with Serge Jaumain, Crossick turns his attention to the petite bourgeoisie's indispensable enemy, the department stores.

As with Crossick's other collections, this volume is timely, arriving at a point where interest in its subject is growing, but where the field remains fragmented. Unfortunately, unlike Crossick's other books, this one merits a lukewarm welcome.

Reflecting the multiplicity of approaches to the study of the department store, the articles in this collection range from