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**Heather Shore, *London's Criminal Underworlds, c. 1720 – c. 1930. A Social and Cultural History*, Houndmills Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, 286 p., ISBN 978-0-230-3404-8**

**Clive Emsley**

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**Édition électronique**

URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/chs/1658>  
DOI : 10.4000/chs.1658  
ISSN : 1663-4837

**Éditeur**

Librairie Droz

**Édition imprimée**

Date de publication : 1 juin 2016  
Pagination : 286  
ISBN : 978-2-600-01953-8  
ISSN : 1422-0857

**Référence électronique**

Clive Emsley, « Heather Shore, *London's Criminal Underworlds, c. 1720 – c. 1930. A Social and Cultural History*, Houndmills Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, 286 p., ISBN 978-0-230-3404-8 », *Crime, Histoire & Sociétés / Crime, History & Societies* [En ligne], Vol. 20, n°1 | 2016, mis en ligne le 01 juin 2018, consulté le 24 septembre 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/chs/1658> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/chs.1658>

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- 1 The 'underworld', 'criminal class', 'organised crime' are popular terms in the media. They suggest an alien 'other', that claims many of the attributes of ordinary society and ordinary members of society, but that has its own, alternative structures and norms following an alternative life style and the expense of everyone else. Some criminologists and historians of crime have provided definitions of such terms. The problem with providing a definition in such an instance is that, if the author is not careful, this can close down some areas of debate and enquiry. The great virtue of Heather Shore's new book is that, while it recognises and often uses some of these definitions, it employs such terms rather more as a means of exploring how the lives of individuals and communities associated with the terms inter-related with their spatial environments and new forms of law enforcement ; equally important, it addresses the ways in which the terms were developed and shaped by both law enforcers and a new print culture.
- 2 The focus of the book is London. It is based on a prodigious range of archival sources and solidly grounded in the secondary work. There are seven detailed chapters : three of these are mainly concerned with tracing the lives of individual offenders and their immediate communities ; the others address particular forms of offending across an extended period. The first two substantive chapters cover the 1720s and 1730s which, following the exposure of Jonathan Wild the thief taker (and one might add thief maker), Shore maintains helped to shape perceptions of the 'crime problem' in the first part of the eighteenth century. The emergent print culture spoke in terms of criminal

gangs, but Shore's close analysis of informers, constables, moral reformers and offenders reveals much more complex inter-relationships between actors originating from the same communities and tied in to similar networks. From the broad picture of criminal networks, moral reformers and informers, sketched against the background of the emergent newspaper press, the discussion switches to Mary (Moll) Harvey, dubbed 'Queen of the Underworld' by Daniel Defoe. Harvey's behaviour as the proprietor of a 'disorderly' tavern and as a thief prompted a succession of clashes with the criminal justice system ; sometimes she won, more generally she lost since, as Shore is at pains to emphasise, the criminal justice system driven by the moral propaganda of the Society for the Reformation of Manners and determined parishioners and magistrates, had so much more authority and weaponry available. A brief excursion into the ways in which the descriptions of street robbery drew upon and fed back into understandings, and fears, of urban danger in the first half of the nineteenth century is followed by the brief criminal biography of another offender – Bill Sheen 'the infanticide.' Sheen and his family appear to have been a singularly nasty crowd. Sheen earned the addition of 'the infanticide' from the discovery, early in 1827, of his baby son's head being found on a table some way from his body. Sheen was acquitted on a legal technicality and for the next 25 years he continued to trouble his local community with his violence, drunkenness and various other offences. At times he appears to have been in cahoots with some corrupt members of the Metropolitan Police but, as in the case of Moll Harvey, local reforming societies linked with members of the local parish and the magistracy to keep the Sheens in check. Shore notes that Bill Sheen's early career corresponds with the years when a young Charles Dickens was developing his journalism in a more literary direction. Is it possible, she asks, that Sheen's well-publicised activities – which allegedly included running a cluster of juvenile offenders – provided elements that fed into both Fagin and Bill Sikes ?

- 3 The four chapters dealing with different forms of offending – pickpocketing and street theft in the early nineteenth century, various forms of fraud and swindling over a (very) long nineteenth century, street-fighting gangs at the turn of the twentieth century, and 'organised crime', mainly involving forms of gambling, during the interwar years – also have a major focus on the individuals involved and the communities from which they came, and with which they interacted and interrelated. Shore suggests some interesting changes and continuities here ; for example in the way that the activities, collectivity and identities of the so-called 'swell mob' in the early and mid-nineteenth century provided some precedent for the hooligans of the 1890s, while the latter shared topographical roots with the interwar gangs. At the same time, the interwar gangsters were beginning to be portrayed in the media, as well as in police memoirs, as 'criminals' akin to the kind of individual portrayed in American movies ; and how useful it was to be able to emphasise the 'criminal's' otherness by noting his Jewish, Irish or Italian origins.
- 4 On occasions Shore lets the stories overwhelm her arguments – not surprisingly, given that these stories are so vivid and, most obviously in the case of Sheen, so appalling. The range and variety of offences that she covers, with the varying timescales do not always help the reader in keeping up with the theoretical issues that she is exploring and developing. Yet the way in which she has pieced together the fragments of hitherto forgotten lives and little known communities is impressive ; it leaves the reader wanting more. The range of her research, the thought that has gone into the argument, and the undoubted stimulus that the book will provide for future work make it an

important and a valuable addition to the cultural and social history of urban communities in general and criminal offending in particular during the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is a book to make the reader think, and a book to which the researcher will almost certainly wish to return.