

Urban History Review Revue d'histoire urbaine

URBAN HISTORY REVIEW
REVUE D'HISTOIRE URBAINE

Carstairs, Catherine, *Jailed for Possession: Illegal Drug Use, Regulation, and Power in Canada, 1920-1961*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006. Pp viii, 241, bibliography, index, \$24,95 (paper)

Greg Marquis

Volume 36, Number 1, Fall 2007

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1015824ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1015824ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (print)

1918-5138 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Marquis, G. (2007). Review of [Carstairs, Catherine, *Jailed for Possession: Illegal Drug Use, Regulation, and Power in Canada, 1920-1961*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006. Pp viii, 241, bibliography, index, \$24,95 (paper)]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 36(1), 65–66.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1015824ar>

activities in public spaces. Similarly, the essays pay attention to material conditions, but recognize the constitutive nature of cultural activities and processes. Individual agency is not overlooked. The discourses of race and nationality are probed, as is the multiple nature of identity and its unsettled nature, its need to be formed and reformed according to changing circumstances.

You might expect that Montreal and its geography would play a key role in the work of a group which has promoted research on the history of the city and its inhabitants for the last twenty years. This is the only slight disappointment with the collection. The city is a fully fleshed-out player in some of the articles, particularly those in the first two of the five sections, but a barely acknowledged back-drop in others. However, highlights include Mary Anne Poutanen's evocative description of the noise, sights and smells of life on the streets of early 19th century Montreal, and the editors' elegant and succinct survey of the history of urban Montreal in the introduction. Besides being a delight to read, the latter provides readers new to Canadian history with a contextual framework for the collection.

The editors argue that in trying to understand how identities are constructed, historians cannot rely on simple dichotomies of public/private, family/state, or home/work. Essays by Darcy Ingram on port-bound sailors, and Anna Shea and Suzanne Morton on unemployed men point out the ways in which philanthropists, social workers and local authorities attempted to refashion their subjects by providing intermediate spaces in which their charges would have the opportunity to engage in appropriate respectable activities—letter writing, reading, mending clothes, recreational games. As we might anticipate, some of these activities proved popular, others were refashioned or rejected.

Bettina Bradbury and Brian Young explore the ways in which identities were affected by death in the 19th century. Young examines the efforts of the McCord family to commemorate its own status and history as one of the most prominent Montreal families. He describes the Victorian obsession with death and the growing importance of cemeteries as intermediate spaces in which carefully designed private family monuments also functioned as public sites of bourgeois leisure. His attention to gendered modes of commemoration underlines the inequalities of gender and the persistence of identity after death. The resistance of one McCord sister who never married, converted to Catholicism, and demanded separate burial in the crypt of Notre Dame, points to the variety of ways in which agency could be asserted. Bradbury persuasively demonstrates that the first year of widowhood was not a time of retreat into the private realm as had been assumed, but one in which the newly-made widow was faced with a series of legal decisions to be made and rituals to be performed in a variety of physical spaces: homes, legal offices, churches, courts of law. Furthermore, her examples illustrate the difference social and economic status, religion, and ethnicity had

on a widow's experience of widowhood, and the degree of control she had over her inheritance.

Three articles investigate the attempts to guide and restrain youth in Montreal. Marie-Ève Harbec looks at the efforts of the Anglican Church to create a college for girls in a picturesque rural setting which effectively secluded them from the distractions of the city. Created in response to disestablishment and the rise of the public school system, and in competition with private Catholic colleges, this Anglican boarding school was unabashedly dogmatic and elitist. These were no "namby-pamby" young ladies; the school provided rigorous intellectual training that would prepare the girls for university training and a potential career. Parents, however, were not totally convinced, and Harbec's discussion of their resistance and the school's Lady Principals is provocative and a welcome addition to the literature. Tamara Myers contributes an examination of the ways in which Jewish social workers and community leaders sought to shape and discipline their youth in the interwar period by directing them into their own social service agencies rather than allowing them to enter the provincial juvenile court system. Karine Hébert takes a different approach, asking how students at the University of Montreal and McGill University articulated their own changing identity during the first half of the twentieth century.

Finally, Sylvie Taschereau provides a study of the precarious existence of small food stores in the Depression era. Jewish, French Canadian and Anglo-Protestant family-run shops survived only by exploiting the labour of every member of the family. This meant that identities as children, parents, and workers had to be juggled continually, albeit in gendered ways. Jarrett Rudy looks at consumption from the opposite direction, focusing on the changing cultural meaning of women smoking cigarettes and the link between smoking, identity, and liberal citizenship.

Negotiating Identities makes a welcome contribution to the urban history of Montreal. It works towards redressing the balance of the existing literature by focusing on segments of the city's population who have received less attention. Anglophone widows, Anglican schoolgirls, Jewish juvenile delinquents, immigrant shopkeepers, and others come to life in these pages as real people with complex lives and complicated identities whose choices try to make the best of their changing circumstances.

Gillian Poulter
Acadia University

Carstairs, Catherine, *Jailed for Possession: Illegal Drug Use, Regulation, and Power in Canada, 1920–1961*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006. Pp viii, 241, bibliography, index. \$24.95 (paper).

Illegal drug distribution and use in Canada, like crime in general, has long been associated with urban society. In seven

chapters (two of which have appeared previously as journal articles), Catherine Carstairs explores the interplay of medical expertise, legislative, police and court responses, and public opinion that shaped Canada's response to opium, cocaine, heroin, and other illegal drugs from the end of World War I until the dawn of the 1960s drug crisis.

Drug policy, and the relevant criminal law, was a federal responsibility, but the two major groups of illegal drug users, Chinese opium smokers in the 1910s and 1930s, and lower-class, white 'junkies' by the 1950s, were not only urban but also regionally concentrated. Between 1922 and 1961 nearly half of all convictions nationally took place in British Columbia, one-fifth in Ontario, and less than a tenth in Québec. Canada's early 20th-century drug war was played out in the streets, taverns, and boarding houses of Vancouver, Toronto, and Montreal (p. 11). The title, *Jailed for Possession*, sums up the typical response to users during what the author calls the "classic" era of Canadian drug use. Although journalists, social reformers, and the emerging profession of psychiatry supported treatment of addicts over incarceration, that latter response prevailed well into the 1960s.

Carstairs examines the anti-drug panic of the 1920s, which took the form of an anti-Chinese crusade and the role of the Opium and Drug Branch (later the Division of Narcotic Control) of the federal Health Department and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. Most drug busts in the period were carried out by the RCMP and the Vancouver and Toronto police and the Chinese, until immigration restrictions greatly reduced their numbers, were an easy target. Chapter 3 examines the experience and culture of post 1930s "hypes" or users, who, unlike recreational drug users in the 1960s and 1970s, tended to be poor, white, and "troubled" in various ways. Up to a fifth of those convicted after World War II were women, and the author explores the appropriate gender dynamics. Most known addicts were prostitutes. Police, corrections, and John Howard Society sources indicate that users of narcotics shared a tight-knit culture, complete with its own slang and rejection of "straight" society.

Separate chapters are dedicated to narcotics policing and the role of physicians. The latter had surprisingly little impact on drug policy as a profession and, as the only legal distributor of narcotics, were under suspicion by enforcement agencies such as the Division of Narcotic Control (DNC). Doctors were able to protect themselves as a profession from DNC snooping over time. Another job for the DNC was to estimate the number of known addicts. Limited treatment programs began in British Columbia and Ontario in the 1950s. Canada's police employed a relatively small number of officers, who resorted to informers and undercover work, to prosecute peddlers and users. In 1928, municipal and provincial police carried out the bulk of drug arrests. By the 1950s the RCMP, armed with writs of assistance (semi-permanent search warrants), was involved in virtually all drug arrests (pp. 94–95). The conviction rate in drug prosecutions was high

and the numbers of convictions, compared to the national crime rate, was low. The police do not appear to have been in a panic about narcotics up to 1961.

Chapter 6 examines the attempt of the John Howard Society (JHS), a prisoners' aid organization, in employing social work methods to help Vancouver drug users. The JHS, reflecting the dominant casework approach of social work, relied mainly on individual counseling of male and female "round-ers." To keep their clients out of jail, counselors attempted to persuade them to cut their ties with the drug culture and join the world of the "square johns." The brief final chapter also deals with a Vancouver topic—the controversy over treatment methods in the 1950s and early 1960s. In order to control the demand by sympathetic community organizations for clinics and possibly treatment by maintenance, the DNC funded a study under Ontario psychiatrist George Stevenson which ended up blaming addicts for being selfish, immoral, and immature. The treatment facilities operating or being planned in the late 1950s and early 1960s were penal, not medical, in nature.

The author employs a wide range of sources, including the press, police and coroners' reports, medical journals, and the records of social agencies. She also constructed two databases from two sets of confidential files: DNC records on known drug users and Vancouver JHS case files. The first database is based on 159 DNC files for 1922–61; the second on nearly three hundred individuals. Although these represent only a fraction of the individuals charged with drug offences in the period under consideration (most of the DNC records were culled), Carstairs is confident that they are representative in terms of age, gender, class, race, country of origin, and geographic location.

This is a well-researched study whose organization, style, and length make it an ideal assignment for undergraduate students. It is also essential reading for anyone interested in how Canada has responded to the drug issue. Although the book was not written as "urban history" there are a number of urban themes that the author may explore in the future, such as the historical geography of drug use and control, and the relation of drug users, peddlers and police to organized crime. Policing scholars would be particularly interested in how the RCMP and local police, given their long history of professional mistrust and competition, negotiated urban drug enforcement.

Greg Marquis
University of New Brunswick Saint John

Durflinger, Serge, *Fighting from Home: The Second World War in Verdun, Quebec Vancouver*: UBC Press, 2006. Pp. 296. \$29.95 (paper).

Fighting from Home is the product of meticulous research into the municipal workings and community spirit of war-