

Book Reviews

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CITIZENS WHO COMMIT MURDER. By Warren S. Wille, M.D. St. Louis: Warren H. Green, Inc. Pp. 186. 1974. Price \$12.50.

I like the title of this book; *Citizens who Commit Murder* implies a reminder that people who kill are not usually gangsters or members of a separate species called "murderers," but rather people whom we see on the street and perhaps even know personally.

They appear, however, not to have the same psychic makeup as most of us. After a preliminary survey of general theories of aggression in relation to homicide, Dr. Wille presents an essay by his former associate Dr. R. R. McKie, a comparative study of the Thematic Apperception Test scores of psychotic and non-psychotic murderers and non-murderers. Dr. McKie concludes "that the difference between murderers and non-murderers, are due to intrapsychic differences, rather than to a lack of adequately learned coping behaviors." Further analysis of the data reveals that murderers are characterized by "A syndrome of repression . . . of anger and fear . . . and inhibition of thoughts of aggressive behavior" (that is, repression and inhibition that build up pressures until a "last straw" situation arises) and by "a fighting stance set, in which murderers are ready to attack or defend, [are] non-committal about [future] outcome of behavior, and see control for [sic] outcome of events as their responsibility" [rather than owing to fate or chance]. ". . . The idea persists that anyone under duress will kill. . . . this is just not so."

The bulk of the book, however, is a presentation of Dr. Wille's own study of "characteristics of the homicidal situation." The author, formerly Director of the Psychiatric Clinic and Hospital, State Prison of Southern Michigan, then director of psychiatric services for the Michigan Department of Corrections (1953-1959), and since a psychiatric consultant to that Department, has examined more than 2,000 convicted murderers and has conducted studies of a randomly selected group of 200. His results show that the "average" murderer, if there is such a thing—the murderer in more than 50% of cases unless otherwise indicated—is from 20 to 39 years old, has no more than an eighth grade education, seldom has a history of violent child-rearing but does have other history of "extremely damaging early environment," has been in trouble with the police prior to the murder, is of a low occupational status, and sometimes (34%) had been drinking before the murder. He shot his victim, who was a spouse, lover, friend, or relative, and he had quarreled with the victim recently prior to the act. He is probably not psychotic before or after the act, but is usually diagnosed as having a "defective superego." If armed-robbery homicides are excluded (and their exclusion would also increase the percentages of many of the above characteristics), he did not premeditate the act or did so only for the usually short time necessary to procure his weapon.

Dr. Wille then proceeds to the discussion of many fascinating case histories, examining such factors as the murderer's psychopathology and family background, the influence of alcohol, sex as a motivating force, and psychosis in the murderer. He includes an interesting and potentially useful chapter on the possible prediction of homicide.

His experience has led him to oppose imprisonment and "punishment" in general, and passionately to oppose the unrestricted distribution of firearms. He makes the

point—a thought new to me, although perhaps not to those engrossed in the subject—that the Second Amendment protects the right to bear only those arms appropriate to a “well regulated Militia.” At least as impressive as his exhortations on the subject are the simple, repetitious narrative statements from his case histories: “He saw a gun there that the other fellow had in his suitcase. . . .”; “The children had been shot [by their mother] with the husband’s . . . rifle, and the husband and the police were bewildered by the fact that ‘the patient had no knowledge’ of where the key to the gun-closet was kept”; “Gertrude, age 7, decapitated her 6-year-old sister . . . with a single blast of her stepfather’s shotgun, which he had left loaded behind the headboard of his bed.”

The impression made by the book is marred by spectacularly sloppy proofreading and editing. I think, however, that its studies, its conclusions, and its case histories should be useful to the forensic psychiatrist and to anyone else concerned with crime prevention and law enforcement.

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