

12-1937

# The Professional Thief, by Edwin H. Suterhland

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## Recommended Citation

Locke, Harvey J. (1937) "The Professional Thief, by Edwin H. Suterhland," *Indiana Law Journal*: Vol. 13: Iss. 2, Article 13.  
Available at: <http://www.repository.law.indiana.edu/ilj/vol13/iss2/13>

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## BOOK REVIEW

THE PROFESSIONAL THIEF. By Edwin H. Sutherland, University of Chicago Press, 1937.

*The Professional Thief*, a fall publication of the University of Chicago Press, is the account of professional theft, written by Chic Conwell, a man who for more than twenty years worked as a pickpocket, shoplifter, and confidence man. This unemotional, non-moralistic volume was carefully

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<sup>17</sup> School City of Elwood v. State ex rel. Griffin (1932), 203 Ind. 626, 180 N. E. 471, 81 A. L. R. 1027.

<sup>18</sup> Burns '33, sec. 28-4307.

<sup>19</sup> Burns '33, sec. 28-4314.

<sup>20</sup> Richards v. School District (1916), 78 Or. 621, 153 P. 482, L. R. A. 1916C, 789, Ann. Cas. 1917D, 266.

<sup>21</sup> Chambers v. Davis (Cal. 1933), 22 P. (2d) 27; Moses v. Board of Education of Syracuse (1926), 127 Misc. Rep. 477, 217 N. Y. S. 265.

<sup>22</sup> Ratcliff v. Dick Johnson School Township (1933), 204 Ind. 525, 185 N. E. 143; State ex rel. Anderson v. Brand (Ind. 1937), 5 N. E. (2d) 531.

edited by Edwin H. Sutherland, a sociologist at Indiana University. Dr. Sutherland wrote the two concluding chapters, giving an interpretation and conclusion, and throughout the book added copious footnotes. The book presents theft as a group way of life with specific historical traditions, standards, and techniques.

Lawyers will find this book helpful in that it gives a vivid picture of professional thieves, what they think about the legal system which has been built up to control criminal behavior, and the methods and techniques used by them in getting around the law.

An extended period of probation is a necessary prerequisite to professional theft. As the result of a crisis such as a break with his family, or a loss of a job, a person may be thrown into situations where he becomes acquainted with professional thieves. He is initiated into thievery by accepting small part-time jobs from these professionals. During the probationary period he acquires the skills, attitudes, codes, connections, and "larceny sense" necessary for successful thievery. When professional thieves recognize that an initiate has attained a certain level of proficiency, his probation ceases, and he is accepted as a full-fledged member of the group.

Professional thievery has many characteristics which are very similar to those of other professions. The professional man spends his whole working time in his particular specialty; so does the professional thief. The professional man makes careful plans for the success of his work; the thief likewise carefully plans every act, including the fixing of his case if he is arrested. The professional man has rather intimate relationships with other members of his profession; the thief has congenial relationships with members of the underworld. The professional man has a code of ethics which he more or less follows: the professional thief has a code of ethics which he invariably follows, his behavior being characterized by such things as strict honesty and integrity in his dealings with members of his own gang, never squawking, and never padding his expense account. In other words, professional theft is a professional type of activity, just as is law or medicine.

The profession of theft is an attempt to secure money with relative safety. Inasmuch as money and safety in the securing of it are values inherent in Western culture, professional theft may be regarded as a product or outgrowth of this type of culture.

The methods and activities of professional thieves include such rackets as picking pockets, sneak-thievery from stores, banks, and offices, shoplifting, stealing from jewelry stores by substitution, stealing from hotel rooms, the confidence game, and extorting money from homosexuals and, more recently, from income tax violators.

Thieves pick those rackets which are comparatively safe. The confidence game is safe because the victims have utilized dishonest methods in an attempt to defraud someone else. The extortion of money from homosexuals or income tax violators is relatively safe because these people are engaging in illegal behavior. Moreover, the professional thief concentrates on those rackets which can be fixed with facility.

In the chapters on "The Fix" and "The Thief and the Law" an inside picture is given of the alliance of thieves, criminal lawyers, the police, politi-

cians, and judges. These chapters show that "the professional thief in the United States is frequently arrested, occasionally convicted, and very rarely compelled to do a bit." Sometimes the thief attempts to fix his case himself, but generally he depends upon a professional fixer or go-between. If a professional fixer is on the case, the thief has a feeling of security, for, although he does not know all the methods used by the fix, he does know that, if he can pay sufficient money, his case will be straightened out. He knows that in general the fix handles the case by giving money to the victim, the police, the prosecuting attorney, or in a few cases by dealing directly with the judge. The essential point as far as the thief is concerned is that he never expects to have the bad luck of running into a case which cannot be fixed in some manner, for he has knowledge of the weaknesses and limitations of the average citizen and public official, and has supreme confidence in the fix.

The professional thief believes that the agencies of justice, such as the police, lawyers, courts, and prisons, are not "agencies of justice." He does not want justice and he hopes and expects not to get it. He believes that almost all members of the special police details in large cities are "burglar coppers," that these coppers do not want to arrest professional thieves too often as that would decrease the amount of money they might receive from the thieves. He feels that it is more important to fix a case in which he is innocent than one in which he is guilty. He considers lawyers as necessary adjuncts to his professional work and on the basis of his experience he believes that "few lawyers in any city are honest and that most of them win their cases by using crooked methods."

The general conclusion of the book is that "adequate control of professional crime cannot be attained by proceeding against thieves one at a time either by punitive or by reformatory policies. Control calls, in addition, for modifications in the general social order out of which professional theft grows." (p. 229)

Those in the habit of thinking of behavior and control of behavior in individualistic terms will probably be critical of this conclusion. Many lawyers will think that this is inadequate, for they will see the immediate need as the detection and punishment of the individual criminal. Social workers in general will feel that the value of reformatory work is underestimated. Sociologists, while tending to agree with the general conclusion, might emphasize more than does the editor that "the problems which are solved are only in a tentative fashion." Particularly those sociologists with a statistical bent will feel that the body of evidence is insufficient and consequently any conclusions which are reached are highly tentative.

However all will agree that this document is a valuable contribution to the understanding of crime. This is especially true inasmuch as the editor, Dr. Sutherland, has unconsciously inserted his insight into parts of the body of the text. The reader of *The Professional Thief* gets the impression that the book is to a certain extent the joint product of a man well versed in the practical experiences of crime and a man well versed in the general field of criminal behavior.

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