

**BOOK REVIEW**

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## Review of: *Criminal Investigation: An Introduction to Principles and Practice*

**REFERENCE:** Stelfox P. *Criminal investigation: an introduction to principles and practice*. Portland, OR: Willan Publishing, 2009, 248 pp.

Humans are an inquisitive lot and, along with cooking, the notion of procedural curiosity is probably the definitive behavior for our species. Tracking game for our ancestors was a form of detective work, seeing the hoof prints in the soil was as good as seeing the game sought after—the tracks represented the animal. Detective work, then, comes naturally to humans. The popularity of detective work in the media enhances this tendency and makes the profession seem more accessible to laypeople. We become arm-chair detectives, Monday-morning investigators with 20/20 hindsight.

Criminal investigations are a much different animal, however, and one that has been in need of professionalization for some time. Much is made of being “professional” with little explanation as to what that means. Stelfox’s book, *Criminal Investigation*, is an excellent treatise on how investigations should be planned, conducted, supervised, and reviewed. As Head of Investigative Practice at the National Policing Improvement Agency in the U.K., Stelfox offers authority, reason, and a refreshing perspective in his writing and examples of “proper policing,” including forensic science:

The TV cliché of “doing a full forensic examination” on a scene is simply not an option. Without a clear understanding of what is already known about an offence and the objective

that an investigator is seeking to achieve, a forensic practitioner would end up applying random techniques in the hope that one of them turned up something useful. This is not only time-consuming and expensive, it risks swamping the investigation with irrelevant material. What is required by all forensic disciplines is a clear objective and an understanding of how it is to be achieved. This requires a dialog between the investigators and the forensic practitioner, thus enabling the latter to apply their specialist knowledge to the problem and identify the most appropriate techniques to achieve the objective (p. 134).

Stelfox recognizes that the irrelevant material would not only clog the investigation but also the laboratory with needless evidence, slowing down the responsiveness of this needed specialty. “Garbage Truck Forensics,” as one colleague calls it when the police back up the truck and dump all the evidence into the laboratory hoping that the scientists will sort it out, as an opportunity cost for a police detective is an idea whose time has more than come.

*Criminal Investigation* covers background on crime and investigative practice, criminal law, and policy (oriented to the U.K., of course), types of information, techniques, decision-making during an investigation, supervision, and why crimes get solved. Some of the material, naturally, will not apply to U.S. investigators but the book is more than worth the price for a professional, clear, eminently practical guide to criminal procedural investigations.

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