

The Horse in the City: Living Machines in the Nineteenth Century. By Clay McShane and Joel A. Tarr. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007. xxii + 242 pp. Notes, index, photographs, illustrations. Cloth, \$50.00. ISBN: 0-801-88600-7.

Reviewed by Thomas A. Kinney

Historians accustomed to explaining the evolution of nineteenth-century American cities in terms of technological innovation will welcome a unique addition to the literature. In *The Horse in the City*, veteran urban scholars Clay McShane and Joel Tarr employ the concept of the “living machine” to explore the vastly understudied world of the urban horse. A thought-provoking introduction contemplating the horse in its least considered, but most important, setting establishes the book’s framework. Eight chapters treat the urban horse in the context of markets, regulation, power, leisure, the built environment, nutrition, and health. A closing chapter and a brief epilogue consider the bittersweet decline of the urban horse in the face of internal combustion. More than thirty illustrations support the text.

At a time when the average person, historians included, equates horses with rural life, one virtue of McShane and Tarr’s work is the profound reminder of their centrality to every nineteenth-century U.S. city. Indeed, the authors argue convincingly that the integral role of the animal in American urban settings did more than anything else to make the nineteenth century the “golden age of the horse.” During an era when every farmer had his team and the cowboy rode his mount into legend, urban horses by the thousands plodded down cobblestoned thoroughfares pulling streetcars, ice wagons, and drays, carried policemen, carted off their dead kin, and even served as stationary power sources. By 1900, a single major city like New York contained an average of one horse for every twenty-six people; Manhattan alone boasted 130,000 of them, and there were thousands more in cities across the country. In other words, urbanization, a process we rightly associate with technical advances, relied on the continued exploitation of man’s ancient beast of burden.

Of course, within that very dependency lay a host of problems. Of at least passing familiarity to most historians was the pungent dilemma of waste removal, but the authors take up

even this mundane matter and explain its complex reality. Equine manure had value as a fertilizer in the country even as the supply of it came from the cities—witness a thriving Brooklyn agriculture built on abundant Manhattan manure. Imported guano, however, eliminated the market incentive for manure removal, even as cities produced more of it than ever before. Accustomed to thinking of urban pollution in terms of manmade smoke and trash, we forget that even biodegradable natural products can, in urban settings, become equally troublesome. Readers may be surprised to learn that, in contests between flesh and machine, horses sometimes came out the winners—at least in the short term. Witness the 1860s triumph of horseflesh over steam in public transport, or the 1920s persistence of horse-drawn wagons for milk delivery.

The Horse in the City abounds in fresh observations like these. There are places where equine enthusiasts may detect a lack of intimate knowledge of the animal proper—as when the authors fail to factor in the superior intelligence of the mule in comparison to the horse—but the value of their observations derives from their expertise as urban historians, not horse fanciers. Considerations of manure as a NIMBY issue and the moderation of animal abuse by urban reform groups stem directly from this perspective. However, some of the most perceptive sections of the book draw on the insights of historians of technology, especially those treating the horse as part of much larger and complex systems. Well-thought-out chapters cover the basic systems of horse procurement, stabling, and employment, along with the less obvious (to us) networks involving everything from horseshoeing to haymarkets and drinking water. Additionally, the authors rightly contend that horse–city interplay affected both entities; if cities had to create supportive infrastructure like municipal stables and carcass-removal programs, the horse became subject to city-driven breeding programs designed to increase size and endurance. In the end, however, horses became a kind of reverse bottleneck as the increasingly mechanized city closed in around a largely unchanged organic power source.

McShane's previous work on urban transport comes to bear on the employment of horses in pulling omnibuses and streetcars, the subject of an entire chapter and scattered references throughout. In dealing with this topic, the authors do more than skim over horsecars as crude imitations of later trolleys by exploring the challenges of operating a public-transport system that was equally reliant on sweat and mechanism. The “living machine” motif excels in bringing these matters to light, even if the analogy becomes strained in places. On the related subject of horses as the power source for fashionable carriages, the authors employ examples from

American writers like William Dean Howells, Theodore Dreiser, and Edith Wharton; this discussion in turn generates coverage of the creation of parkways as venues for afternoon promenades. In these and in a host of other ways, consideration of the urban horse sheds light on the growth and development of American cities as diverse as Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and Chicago.

A few minor problems, such as inconsistent chapter titles, unnumbered illustrations (and one poor-quality map), and the puzzling absence of a bibliographic essay, mar the book, but, on the whole, this tidy and workmanlike volume makes an important contribution. Historical scholarship has until now treated the horse as merely a smelly precursor to mechanization. Employing a useful mechanical motif and a wide array of sources, McShane and Tarr's study reminds us that, in the nineteenth century, horses literally kept American cities moving.

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