

THE IRISH-AMERICAN GANGSTER



IN FILM

By
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When *The Godfather* was released in the early seventies, it effectively created a myth of the virtually unbeatable Italian crime family for the American public that endured for the remainder of the century. This film also effectively eliminated all other white ethnic organized gangs from the silver screen, as well as from the public's eye. Hollywood, as we shall see, had their history wrong in this case. The Italian Mafia was never as invincible as Hollywood depicted it on film, nor did they always have everything their own way when it came to illegal activities. It wasn't until the close of the last century that the film industry began to expose the old-time hoods as being fallible and besieged on all sides from new criminal elements connected with newly arrived immigrant groups. The Cubans, Russians and the Colombian hoods, along with the longer established African and Mexican American gangs, had begun to nibble away at the turf long controlled by the almighty Italian mob.

As the paradigm of the urban underworld began to shift to reflect the new realities of the global economy, another look at the past by historians and Hollywood is revealing that the Italian gang never had absolute power as it was once commonly believed. The Irish hoodlums, to single out the subject of this paper, were actually engaged in gangland activities years before the arrival of the Italians and the Irish also competed with the Italians up until recently.

Since D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), when Hollywood first blended historical fact with pure fantasy (and racial basis) in a feature-length movie, historians, social critics and educators have bemoaned the modern reality that many Americans now learned their history from motion picture rather than from the history textbook; this learning process, the thesis states, leading to distortion, misconception and misunderstanding. Hollywood produces illusions, the mass believe in these illusions.



D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*

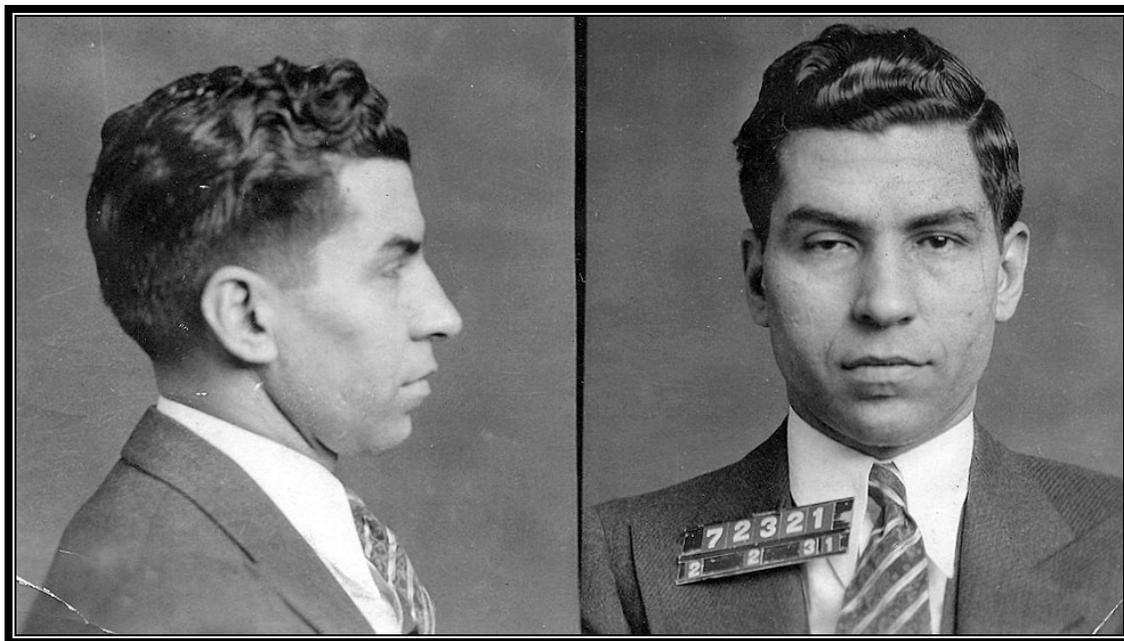
In this paper, I shall argue that sometime Hollywood does get their history correct, at least with *The Gangs of New York*. The assertion that it was the Irish street gangs of the 1840s who established the ground rules of organized crime activity in America is correct. Secondly, films such as *Cotton Club*, *Road to Perdition* and *Last Man Standing* indicate that the Irish gangs were on equal

footing with the Italians during Prohibition. These films depicted the Irish versus the Italian warfare raging in the big cities but also ranging to the cornfields of the Midwest to the deserts of the southwest. Thirdly, recent motion pictures such as *The Departed* and *State of Grace* serve as proof that the Irish godfathers still hold sway in New York's Hell's Kitchen and Boston's Charlestown. It took the Irish American gangster many years to recover from the damage done to their myth and history by Marlon Brando and Francis Ford Coppola.

Finally, it will be argued that more than a few Irish Americans may enjoy this reminder of their ethnic group's seamier side of their cultural history. To some contemporary Irish Americans, the gangsters have long been a part of their collective ethnic identity, along with the priest, the cop, the politician, the boxer or the foot soldier. It's this collective Irish Catholic identity that serves as an escape from the WASP hegemony that they have slipped into since the election of John F. Kennedy in 1960.

Mickey Machine Gun is back for his last gasp of air before he is finally put to rest by history...and Hollywood.

Actually, the Irish American gangster only made his comeback after Hollywood returned to the dusty police files and the yellowing newspaper clippings to re-introduce the Jewish racketeer to American filmgoers. *Bugsy* (1991), *Mobsters* (1991) and *Once Upon a Time in America* (1984) reminded the public that Jews, hand-in-hand with the Italians, were instrumental in transforming the neighborhood ethnic gangs of the Roaring Twenties into the corporate-style syndicate visualized by Lucky Luciano during the Great Depression. Bugsy Siegel invented the casinos and nightlife of Las Vegas and Meyer Lansky reigned for years as supreme as any Italian Don. The Jewish thug of Chicago's Westside or the southern point of the Bronx was as tough as any Al Capone. However, it isn't the purpose of this paper to explore how Jewish Americans feel about their collective ethnic past.



Lucky Luciano



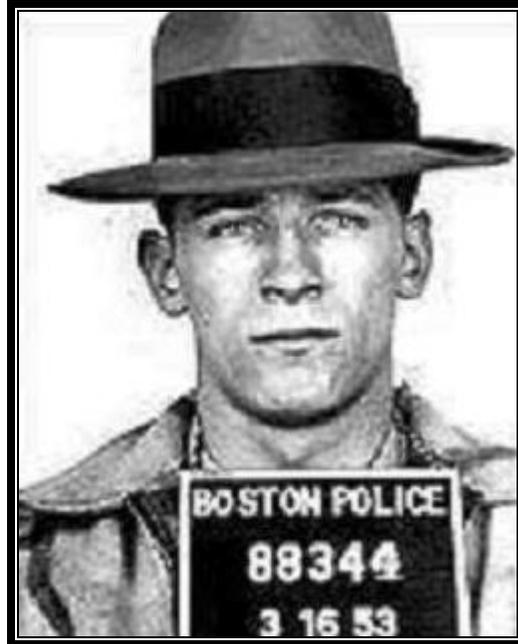
Bugsy Siegel



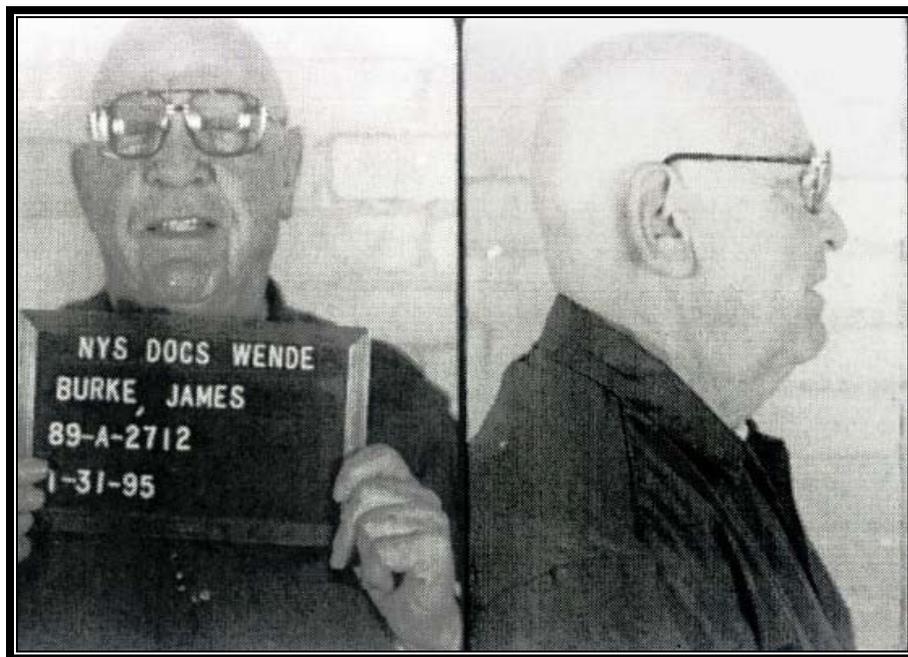
Meyer Lansky

Taking their rightful place alongside the coin-flipping, finger snapping and street talking Italian or Jewish hood were the Irish, the ones who probably invented the coin-flipping, finger snapping and street talking. According to Herbert Ashbury's ground-breaking *the Gangs of New York* the Irish invented many of gangland's most notable trademarks back in the days of Boss Tweed's pre-Civil War New York City.

The revelation that the Irish played an important role in the shaping of America's underbelly should come as no surprise to any Irish American interested in their own cultural history. However, many of these same Irish Americans probably didn't know that their own Whitey Bulger was the godfather of Boston or that another one of their own, Jimmy Burke, had pulled off the biggest heist in American history, or that yet another, Jimmy Reardon, had splattered the streets of the Big Apple with more blood during the seventies and eighties than any other crime chief in America.



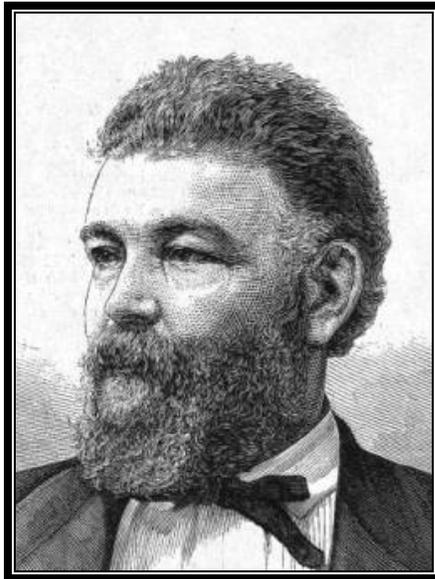
Boston's Whitey Bulger



James "Jimmy the Gent" Burke

The annals of American street gangs can be traced back to the 1840s when two million desperate Irish men and women fled the potato famine in the old world for a better life in the new

world. Unfortunately, most avenues for upward mobility were closed to these new Americans due to their lack of skills and education. The prejudices of mostly Protestant America towards the mostly Catholic Irish only made matters worse. The micks would have to earn their pennies, nickels and dimes on the hardscrabble streets of urban America. Operating on the wrong side of the law quickly served as an outlet for many an Irishman with savvy, muscles and guts. Bootlegging and drug pushing were both enterprises for the future so the early Irish fire plug thugs earned their upkeep through stealing, pimping and hiring out to ward bosses on election day; the brightest of these lads graduating into the ranks of big time gambling: cards, dice and horse-racing.



John "Old Smoke Morrissey(Above) and Mike McDonald (Below)



John “Ole Smoke” Morrissey of New York’s Bowery and “King” Mike McDonald of Chicago’s red light district built-up empires that depended upon games of chance. Frank Farrell, one-time owner of baseball’s New York Yankees, was probably the most infamous of these 19th century Irish-American high rollers. Farrell’s Bronze Door gambling house became legendary. These classy old-time sporting men were eclipsed at the turn of the century by Irish toughs such as Owen Madden and Jack Nolan. “Owen the Killer” evolved from being a mere pawn with Hell’s Kitchen’s Gophers to becoming the owner of Harlem’s Cotton Club and a founding member of the national crime syndicate of post-Prohibition America. “Legs Diamond” made the jump from the ranks of the Hudson Dusters to being a big-time bootlegger, as well as the personal gun for hire of Arnold Rothstein.



Eddie Diamond, Owney Madden and Legs Diamond while in the Gophers



The Gopher Gang

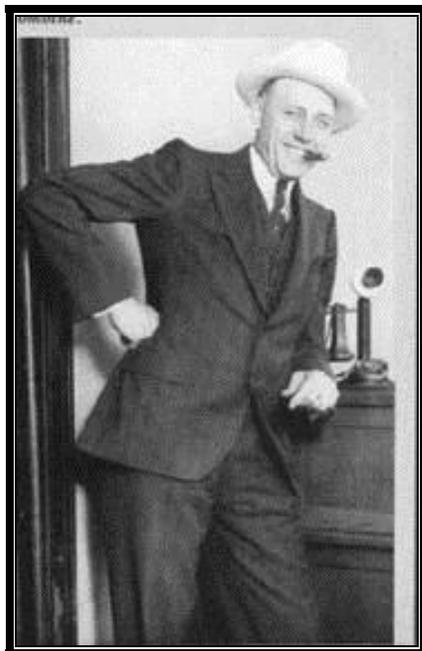
A contemporary of Madden and Nolan was Dean O'Banion, one-time safecracker and train robber who became the dominant force of the North Side of Chicago. By 1925, the limping Irishman was Johnny Torrio and Al Capone's biggest rival for the Windy City's beer and booze trade. Vincent "Mad Dog" Coll, Spike O'Donnell, "Big" Bill Dwyer, Vannie Higgins, Klondike O'Donnell, Jelly Roll Hogan were all powerful Irish gang chieftains who controlled huge swaths of turf from the Midwest to the eastern seaboard.



Johnny Torrio



Al Capone



Spike O'Donnell



Vannie Higgins



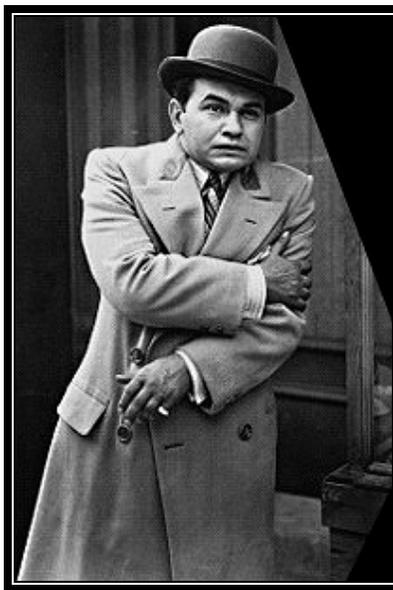
Jelly role Hogan

Waugh groundbreaking research into the Egan's Rats gang of St. Louis (*Egan's Rats: the Untold Story of the Prohibition era Gang that ruled St. Louis*) traces this gangs origins in the Gay Nineties to the death of his final leader William "Dint" Colbeck in 1940.

Waugh writes: "They came out of the slums east and north of downtown St. Louis sandwiched between the burgeoning skyscrapers and the muddy Mississippi River. Living in rickety tenements and tarpaper shacks, many of the inhabitants were Irish immigrants, having fled to America in the mid-nineteenth century to escape the great potato famine," (Waugh, p.17). The saga of the Egan's Rats is begging to be made into a feature-length movie.

When the early talking gangster films became the vogue in the earliest days of the Great Depression, the three most important of these films were *Little Caesar*, *Scarface* and *Public Enemy*: all were released by the end of 1932. The first two films dealt with hoodlums who were noticeably Italian, loosely based on Al Capone, while the third was clearly a Chicago Irishman. Munby contends (*Public Enemies, Public Heroes* pp.1-17) that the ethnic gangster served a twofold purpose: 1) offering a

road to success for the urban ethnic group, and 2) allowing mainstream America to demonize ethnic groups as elements making up the crime groups.



Little Caesar (Above) and Paul Muni in Scarface



Munby also wrote: “Accordingly, it could be argued that in the pre-cash era gangster film, the gangster’s ethnicity was significant only to the extent that it could help confirm the logic of a divisive and exclusionary national ideology. Being Italian, Irish, Polish or Jewish only help to clarify the boundaries that separated the realm of legitimate values from the illegitimate. In other words, ethnicity, far from threatening to upset the traditional mythology only served to strengthen it. Moving to the city initially kept the old-stock culture on the right side of the street.”

When the “old-stock” such as John Dillinger, “Pretty Boy” Floyd, Bonnie and Clyde, and the Barkers began to fill up the ranks of America’s biggest bank robbing during the harshest years of the Depression, the rhetoric had to be changed to go along with the mythology. Dillinger was linked with the myth of the old western outlaws who, in turn, were linked to Robin Hood and the whole “taking from the rich to give to the poor” ethos.

While the rural audiences could demonize Tom Powers as a dangerous mick with a machine gun, the Irish urban audiences could identify with the tough paddy who could use his moxie, as well as his dukes, to be able to grab his share of the American dream pie. Scholars debate over which famous real life gangsters served as the model for Tommy Powers. Cagney’s character was probably a Hollywood brew consisting of Owen Madden, Dean O’Banion and Hymie Weiss, Dean’s second-in-command in Chicago’s 42nd and 43rd wards. I lean towards O’Banion, Chicago’s most notorious bootlegger before he was bumped off by three of Capone’s torpedoes in his very own Clark Street florist shop. Tommy Powers received his very own unique execution, wrapped up in a sheet like a mummy and dumped on his mother’s doorstep by the Schemer Burns mob.

Out of Chicago’s stockyard district, Tom Powers, the son of a beat cop, progresses up the ranks of Paddy Conner’s South Side gang until he is second-in-command. Shadoian (*Dreams and Deadends*, pp.50-60) describes Tom Powers as the “prototype of high-living gangsters, synonymous

in the public mind with fast, fancy cars, easy women, boozing, swank nightclubs, and reckless uninhibited activity.” A teenager growing up in today’s Los Angeles’ Mexican barrio or Brooklyn’s Haitian section would perceive the local reigning kingpin, the direct descendants of Tom Powers, as a dude who “has it all.”

The Tom Powers character is Hollywood’s first truly identifiable Irish-American racketeer as well as the most important. The great James Cagney, complete with his flaming red hair, slangy street-speak and drugstore cowboy strut, will always remain the poster boy for the defining image of Mickey Machine Gun.

Angels with dirty faces (1938) and *Roaring Twenties* (1939) solidified Cagney as America’s number one tough mug, more so than Paul Muni or Edward G. Robinson. In the former film, Cagney’s Rocky Sullivan is loosely patterned on Francis “Two-Gun” Crowley, a flash-in-the-pan, five and dime punk teenage desperado. Both Rocky and Two-Gun survived shootouts with the men in blue before being fried in the electric chair for first degree murder. Happily, Rocky turned yellow on his final mile whereas Crowley behaved himself with quiet dignity in his final moments. Of course, Francis didn’t have to bother about scaring off the Dead Ends from emulating him either. In the latter film, Cagney’s Eddie Barlett was modeled on Eddie Fay, a former taxi driver who had become one of New York’s most respectable bootleggers. Both Eddies were victims to the stock market crash and the demise of the blue law banning drink. Both Eddies wound up hacking their cabs in front of their former nightclubs. Cagney’s character sad plight ends with one final shootout; his death on the steps of the Catholic Church was patterned on the death of a real life Midwestern gangster who died on the steps of Holy Rosary Catholic Church in Kenosha, Wisconsin.

As the Thirties twinkled away, Jimmy Cagney turned to roles as G men, tough reporters and other variations of his Tom Powers routine, only this time he normally was on the right side of the law. It wasn’t until well after World War II that he agreed to take on the part of another hoodlum.

Cagney's Cody Jarrett in *White Heat* (1949) is perhaps his greatest performance as a criminal.

Curiously, Jarrett is never identified as being of Irish origin and he is more of the nominal leader of a heist crew than a kingpin in an organized crime group.

Manhattan Melodrama (1944) is less important to the Irish American gangster genre than any of Cagney's trio of early films. Blackie Gallaher (Clark Gable) and Jim Wade (William Powell) characters in this B movie symbolizes the basic unity of the Irish gangster with the Irish cop; one forged upon the sidewalks of their shared childhood. The only real historical importance of this film is that it was the last movie the great John Dillinger, the notorious bank robber, viewed before he was gunned down by Melvin Purvis and his G men outside of Chicago's Telegraph Theatre.

In 1944, Preston Foster appeared in a low budget film titled *Roger Tuohy, Gangster*, that presented a largely fictional account of this Chicago bootlegger's career as a would be gangster. John William Tuohy (*When Capone's Mob murdered Roger Tuohy: the Strange Case of "Jake the Barber" and the Kidnapping that Never Happened*, 2001, and *The Wee Book of Irish Gangsters*) debunked the myth that "Black" Roger and the "Terrible" Tuohy gang were professional snatch men. Instead, Tuohy had built up a sizeable empire northwest of Chicago city limits in Des Plaines and the Capone Syndicate had Roger framed in order to snatch his territory from him. The movie does correctly portray Tuohy escape from the Big House and his recapture by the police. The real life Roger Tuohy spent years behind bars only to be bumped off by the Mob shortly after his release from prison.

An off-shot of the Irish gangster genre were the Irish street urchin movies. Originally appearing as a stereotypical Irish-Catholic street gang in *Dead End* (1937) and *Angels with Dirty Faces*, the Dead End Kids later morphed into, briefly, the Little Tough Guys and, later, the East Side Kids; finally and sadly ending their long run as the Bowery Boys. About one hundred feature-length films chronicled the misadventures of this one New York street gang. Leo Gorcey and Huntz Hall, under a variety of names, usually spearheaded the lads over a twenty year period.

In the early films, it's refreshing to see a Jewish kid (Billy Halop's Soapy) act as the top dog in an Irish gang in the early Dead End Kids movies. Jewish Soapy, sometimes Tommy Gordon, with the fists and savvy of any Tommy Powers, kept his troops in line. Tommy Gordon even reigned supreme over Leo Gorcey and Hunt Hall, both real life Irish goons. It was only in the later series that Gorcey and Hall were able to muscle in on top billing slot left by the departure of Billy Halop for more adult fare.

However, it is Leo Gorcey, who was part Irish and part Jewish and all Catholic off camera, and Huntz Hall, who was 100 percent Irish-Catholic with a brother and a son as a priest, and is best remembered in these long-running and popular series. Gorcey's Muggs McGennis sporting a battered, pinned back hat was known for his tortured logic, fractured grammar and round-house punch. Muggs, like many stereotypical Hollywood tough guys, carried a heart of gold beneath his rough exterior. Huntz Hall, the truest Irish street kid of the lot, was reduced to playing Glimpy, an almost moronic fool on the order of Art Caney's Fred Norton in *The Honeymooners*. Some examples of standard East Side Kids' fare were *Ghosts on the Loose* (1943) and *Docks of New York*(1945).

Sometime in the late forties Leo Gorcey and Huntz Hall took their Irish street gang over to another Hollywood studio as well as another New York neighborhood. The Bowery Boys were a last ditch effort to still milk a profitable cash cow. According to Leo Gorcey, Jr., (*LIFE WITH THE DEAD END KID*) his father continued to rake in a huge fortune based on the percentages from these lousy films cranked out until the end of the fifties .*the Bowery Battalion* (1951) and *Bowery to Baghdad*_(1955) did very well indeed at box offices in both urban and rural America. Richard Roat and Len Getz have recently published books detailing the various films made by the Bowery Boys and they provide an appreciation for the comedy team of Gorcey and Hall. TCM recently aired all forty-eight of the Bowery Boy movies in 2010 and 2011.

Corrigan and White (*The Film Experience*, 42) describe “mise-en-scene” as the “fictional or real place where the action and the event occur.” Perhaps the Irish Americans from the dying urban Irish enclaves could still identify with the antics of Slip Mahoney (Gorcey) and his pot-bellied loser followers. Maybe the Irish Catholics who led the charge of white flight out to the new suburbs looked at the non-threatening doings happening in the Louie’s Malt Shop on the Bowery with a certain amount of longing for a dying epoch in their cultural history. Slip and his lads may have been always on the lookout for a handout but they were also a far cry from the Jets and Sharks of post-war Hell’s Kitchen. By the early sixties the urban Irish were confronted by the realities of changing street scene as depicted in *West Side Story* (1959). The Irish were still hanging around the Kitchen but they were daily losing inches of their turf to the new Spanish-speaking immigrants who were pouring into the tenements.

When Jimmy Cagney hung up his Tommy-gun and left the rackets the Hollywood Irish American gangster was regulated to a slew of B grade films in the fifties and early sixties. Mickey Machine-Gun was reduced to appearing in low budget, black and white, outdoor theatre fare. *Machine Gun Kelly* (1958), *The Rise and Fall of Legs Diamond* (1960) and *Mad Dog Coll* (1961) were programmers that added little to gangster film lore.

The legendary Legs Diamond was played by Ray Danton and the infamous Mad Dog Coll was played by John Davis Chandler, both were competent but lower billing actors. At least the part of George “Machine-Gun” Kelly was performed by a very young Charles Bronson and directed by an equally young and upcoming Roger Corman. Furthermore, Hollywood got it right with the machine-gunning of the Mad Dog in a drugstore telephone booth and the surrender of the Machine-Gun to the FBI with the firing of one shot. “Pop-gun Kelly,” one of the Federal agents sneered into his face as he pleads for his life. Corman’s crew also were correct in depicting the real George Kelly, Thomas Barnes before being renamed by the daily presses or his wife, was nothing more than a

down-at-the-heels southern bank robber of Irish ancestry whose botching of a kidnapping scheme led to his capture by J. Edgar Hoover's G men. The media over-glorified Kelly in order to sell newspapers, as well as to add to the growing luster to the reputation of the FBI.

Elia Kazan's *On the Waterfront* (1955) stands as the lone exception during this timeframe as a good film based on the theme of Irish American gangland antics. Marlon Brando and Rod Steiger's Malloy brothers may have been the figment of novelist and screenplay writer Budd Schulbeber's imagination, but Lee J. Cobb's Johnny Friendly bares more than a passing resemblance to Eddie McGrath, a real life pier boss. McGrath, the undisputed czar of the Hudson River docks, controlled New York's shipping industry for twenty years; at the same time controlling the war chest of the International Longshoremen's Union. McGrath was eventually chased down to Miami by a federal commissions investigating racketeering on the waterfront. By making Father Barry (Karl Malden) and Terry Malloy (Marlon Brando) the heroes behind Johnny Friendly's downfall, giving the audience somebody to cheer on.

The Malloy brothers are also important to Irish cultural studies because they represented the paradox of the Irish urban experience: success and failure, good versus bad, and blood ties winning out over bonds to outsiders. Brando's Terry Malloy, in one of Hollywood's greatest performances, is a punch drunk former boxer and a current freeloader. Irish Terry has gone from being a middle-weight contender for the crown to becoming a very minor character lurking on the fringes on the Irish mob. Terry is never a gangster in the true sense of the word, but he rubs shoulders with the criminal element every day of his life. He's also quick to do the bidding of Johnny Friendly, no matter how wrong these commands may be. Terry is a product of his neighborhood, a Hell's Kitchen slum, and the code of silence that prevails among his social class. Loser though he may be, Terry Malloy is essentially a decent man with a grounding in the rights and wrongs of Catholicism; one who grieves over the death of a friend pushed off a tenement roof by Johnny's thug after being lured there by

Johnny himself. Terry also has the noble impulses of protecting his friend's sister, Edie, played by Eva Marie Saint, and to join in Father Barry's crusade to protect the rights of dock workers.

Rod Steiger's Charlie "the Gent" Malloy represents the Irish slum boy who made good, graduating with a law degree from Fordham and becoming the mouthpiece of Johnny Friendly's crime family. However, Charlie's college education and refined manners aren't enough to save him from the wrath of Friendly when he refuses to put a contract out on his own brother. There's much in Charlie Malloy that was from Jimmy Hines, Dutch Schultz's famous Irish American mouthpiece.

One of *On the Water Front*'s most gripping scenes is in the film's finale with a defiant Terry Malloy taking his place in the work line up after being subjected to a brutal beating at the hands of the river rats employed by the mob. Budd Schulberg's novel by the same title has an alternative ending strikingly different from that of the movie. It is apparent that audiences in the fifties didn't want to view a movie wrap up with Brando's likeable character floating down the Hudson with an ice pick planted in his back.

It wasn't until 1968 that the classy-classical Irish gangster of yore made his reappearance in Corman's *The St. Valentine Day's Massacre*, a surprise hit during the height of the flower power era. This film recounted the events leading up to Al Capone's bloody red valentine to George "Bugs" Moran, gangland leader of Chicago's North Side. The movie stresses the ethnic overtones of the Capone gang versus the Moran gang: the South Side being made up of Italians while the North Side is represented by Irish, German and Jewish hoodlums, Chicago gangs were never as neatly defined or divided except by the newspapers. The climax of the plot is reached with the wholesale slaughter of seven of the North Siders in a Clark Street garage on the morning of February 14, 1929. Unlike many gangster movies since, *ST. VALENTINE'S DAY MASSACRE* presents the Irish on an equal footing with the Italians. Most films generally polish off the Irish early on so the Italians can feud with other Italian crime families. Movies such as *Mobsters* and *The Gangster Chronicles* preferred to

focus on the Masseria and Maranzano vendetta rather than the entanglements with the Micks.

Waugh and other scholars of gangster history believe that Al Capone put in a call down to St. Louis to contracting out the murder of Moran's gang to the Egan's Rats.

Corman, in another innovative step, made the Irish gang more interesting, if less efficient, than the Italians. Moran and his boys were more dangerous, daring and more individualistic than Capone's corporate combine. Moran shares a beer with his gang as they devise a plan to rub-out their rivals. Capone, on the other hand, contracts out the hit on Moran to a lower rung Jack "Machine-Gun" McGurn after a meeting held around a conference table in a swanky hotel.

Rose Keefe (*The Man who Got Away: the Bugs Moran Story*) gives her readers the real inside dope on the real-life Moran, who took part in the daylight attack on Johnny Torrio, Capone's one-time boss. Moran wasn't above joining in on any shooting done by his torpedoes. Both Moran and Pete Gusenberg (played by Ralph Meeker and George Segal) were presented as street punks wearing expensive suits and two-tone spates. Segal's Gusenberg even pays homage to Cagney's Tom Powers, not once but twice. Gusenberg and Powers smash food into the faces of their blond bombshell molls and they both wipe-off their beer-splattered shoes with a bartender's coat.

Corman does incorrectly have his Al Capone (Jason Robards) identify Bugs Moran as that "no good Irish son of a bitch!" Keefe, Moran most serious researcher to date, has traced the real life Moran's origins back to French immigrants settled in St. Paul, Minnesota. Keefe is also quite clear in reminding her readers that six of the seven men killed in the massacre were of German or Jewish extraction rather than Irish. However, it is a historical fact that the North Side mob was initially formed by Irishmen Dean O'Banion and "Dapper" Dan McCarthy.

Corman reprised the Irish-Italian theme in his 1975 film, *Capone*, starring Ben Gazzara as Big Al, a far less interesting film than his earlier pieces. The screenplays of both of these Chicago sagas were the work of Howard Browne, one-time Chicago beat reporter, who knew some of the seven

hoods executed by the Capone organization. Browne's experience as a reporter gives a more realistic touch to the Corman movies than other screenplay writers could provide a director. One can probably take Browne's word that although George Moran was the chieftain of the other gang, he was also one of the guys while on the other hand, the South Side guys referred to their boss as "Mr. Capone" and not a chummier "Al." Fred "Killer Burke" and Gus Winkler, both of Egan's Rats and called the "American boys" by Capone, probably were the true brains behind the Massacre. (*Egan's Rats*, 243-264).

Frank Morris was a small time hood from New York who moved from the west side of the city to the west coast after a series of short prison sentences for stealing. The Irish petty thief and street corner drug peddler's luck was no better in California than it had been back in Hell's Kitchen. Morris found himself in a cell block at Alcatraz Island, the one-time home of the notorious Al Capone. The low-ranking Irish thug managed to pull-off a stunt that Al Capone never even attempted: he managed to escape from Alcatraz. Frank Morris, a minor gangster, only real claim to fame is that he was never recaptured and his exploits were made into a movie. *Escape from Alcatraz*, starring Clint Eastwood as Frank Morris, was released in 1970, and it recalled Frank's break-out in the opening years of the Sixties. Chances are that Morris was swept out in to the Pacific Ocean by the Bay's swift currents. However, Frank's body was never fished out of the pond. Clarence Anglin (Jack Thibeu) and John Anglin (Fred Ward) had also scaled the wall and outran the search lights with Frank and, they too, were never captured. I recently came across an internet article that alleged that an elderly American living in Connemara, a remote county in the west of Ireland, had stepped forward and stated he was Frank Morris. A waiting raft and a seas-bound ship provided the man with transportation away from the Golden Gate. Irish relatives helped this Frank Morris to start a new life in the Emerald Isle. Unfortunately, the story proved to be a hoax.

T.J. English's groundbreaking study, *Paddy Whacked* puts into the story the items many films left out. The Irish and Italians were competing for the loot coughed up by Prohibition and they both basically played the game according to the underworld code of ethics drawn up back in pre-civil war New York City. The two opposing urban ethnic groups were fighting over a way of life, as well as over turf. The Irish gangsters at the end of the bootlegging era were rapidly facing extinction. With a loosely structured organization that wasn't much different to the outlaw days of Billy "the Kid" Bonney, probably baptized as Henry McCarty in a Hell's Kitchen parish church for the famine Irish, and the hombres who rode with him and marooned in the boozy haze of the wet twenties, the Irish gang couldn't compete with the tightly woven Mafia and their businesslike Jewish allies. According to an urban legend, the Irish racketeers also may have expressed a marked displeasure at the peddling of flesh and drugs. The Italians, according to this theory, exterminated the leading Irish gang leaders by Repeal in 1933 and then they turned their attention towards eliminating the mighty Jewish dons. English isn't the first author to speculate that the move to deal out the Irish was the brainchild of Lucky Luciano and Meyer Lansky. Be that as it may, the Great Depression, coupled with Repeal, did more to shrink the profit margin of Irish gangland than any well-planned blueprint or palace conspiracy. All of Chicago, New York and Boston's Mickey Machine-Guns were destined to go out the way of the James Gang and the Dalton: violent men who were unwilling to adapt to the times and their bullet-riddled corpses winding up on display in storefront coffins. Mickey Machine-Gun never stood a chance against the cigar-chomping men in gray flannel suits. Or did he? Just because Hollywood wasn't interested in the Irish gangsters anymore did that mean he no longer existed? Is it possible that the Irish mob went so below the radar that even scholars of crime forgot about them?

The alleged death of the Irish mob is only lightly brushed upon in the film *MOBSTERS*, the story of the unification of the Italian and Jewish gangs into one mega-syndicate. Nicholas Sadler

does a fantastic job as Mad Dog Coll, the one-man crime wave and solo terrorist act, This Mickey Machine-Gun becoming the ultimate symbol of the Celtic lone wolf. It's up to the Mad Dog, machine gun in hand, to add a touch of old fashioned Irish rebellion and American individualism to the Mafia hybrid of European regal and American boardroom.

Vincent Coll was indeed a vicious killer from Dutch Schultz's old stomping ground, the South Bronx via Donegal, Ireland, and he was also the head honcho of a small but compact gang of mostly Italian and Jewish sluggers who specialized in kidnapping and the assassinating of fellow New York gangsters. The real Mad Dog, as depicted by *Mobsters*, was a nut case responsible for the drive-by shooting death of a child

Francis Ford Coppola also touched upon the career of the vicious Vincent in his film COTTON CLUB substituting the name Dwyer for that of Coll, played by a very young Nicholas Cage. Coppola also reintroduced Owen Madden (Bob Hoskins) to moviegoers. Hoskins, an Englishman, gives "the Killer" a cockney accent dipped in posh instead of Madden's Liverpool Irish-Scouse brogue. Hoskins, however, did an excellent job with Owens's real life habit of putting on refined British airs. The one-time roughhouse Gopher had gone to great lengths to reinvent himself as a polished member of society and as owner of the Big Apple's number one speakeasy. The movie never offers the audience a glimpse of Owen the Killer as Mickey Machine-Gun who went in cahoots with the Italians and sold out his fell Mickey Machine-Guns. According to several sources, including English, it was Madden who kept Coll on the drugstore telephone long enough for Bo Weinberg, Dutch Schultz's number one gunslinger, to pull off the execution.

These two films perked America's interest in the old-time Irish gangsters, but it was left to *State of Grace* (1989) and *Goodfellas* (1990) to bring the Irish American up-to-date in America's modern cement jungles. The former film is loosely based upon the Jimmy Coonan-Mickey Featherstone band of bandits, heralded as the Westies by the media, and their reign of terror in

Hell's Kitchen in the final days of the Irish tenements before it was renamed as Clinton and the yuppies pushed out the micks. The latter movie dealt with an Irish gang situated in Queens, New York near the airport and headed by the notorious Jimmy "the Gent" Burke, played by Robert DeNiro (called Jimmie Conway in the film), and his cokehead sidekick, Henry Hill. Hill was portrayed by Ray Liotta. Joe Pesci played the weird Tommy DeVito (Thomas DeSimone in real life) a made man in the Gambino family. Burke and his crew managed to pull off a six million dollar caper by raiding the Lufthansa in the LaGuardia cargo terminal. Burke was more of a hijacker than a racketeer. He was also a ruthless thug, knocking off twenty- five opponents and was once accused of torturing the children of people who owed him money. Jimmy the Gent also probably knocked off members of his own gang before dying in prison. Most of that six million dollar prize was never recovered by the authorities. *The Big Heist* (2001) covers much of the same ground as *Goodfellas* but it lacks the directing skills of Martin Scorsese. However, interestingly enough, in this latter depiction, Donald Sutherland's Jimmy Burke speaks with a Irish brogue and is the leader of a motley gang of misfits and losers.

Finally, I shall conclude my paper by briefly discussing the three most important Irish American gangster films here at the opening of the twenty-first century: *Gangs of New York* (2002), *The Road to Perdition* (2002) and *The Departed* (2006), these three films covering the involvement of the Irish in gang life dating from pre-civil war days to present time. This trio of films has brought the Irish American gangster full circle.

Although *Gangs of New York* was a very late entry in entry in the genre of Irish-American gangster films, it provides the historical groundwork for all other films based on Yankee- Celtic hoodlum life. *GANG* is loosely based on the factual evidence that traces the proto street thug to New York's Five Point neighborhood on the Lower East Side. No drive by shootings, high tech weaponry or designer drugs by these lads. The Dead Rabbits, the Roach Guards and the Pug Uglies

from the Five Points didn't play patty cake or trash talk with their True Blue American rivals such as the Atlantic Guards and the Bowery Boys as rumbles were fought with swords, butcher knives and clubs. Red Rocks Farrell, member of the Whyos, was a classic example of a gang thug of the 19th century. Durney describes how rivals gangs numbering anywhere from 5,000 to 10,000 made war on the city streets before the American Civil War. Durney wrote: "There was a tremendous roar as the two crowds clashed. The two mobs tore into each other mercilessly.

Eventually the gangs backed off after several prominent Dead Rabbits were shot. The police, too retreated, taking their prisoners with them; two gangsters whom they had managed to knock off!" (*The Mob: The History of the Irish Gang*, 22).

Martin Scorsese film focuses upon the real-life conflict between Bill "the Butcher" Poole (Daniel Day Lewis) and his Native Americans (White Anglo-Saxon Protestants) against an alliance of outcasts from the Emerald Isle sporting gang labels like the O'Connell Guard and the Forty Thieves. The "Priest" (Liam Neeson) is roughly cut from the cloth that was John "the Smoke" Morrissey. During the New York Draft Riots during the Civil War the Irish gangs of the Five Points conducted the biggest civil disturbance in the history of the United States. The Irish gradually lost their hold on the gang life in the East Side to the Italians commanded by Paul Kelly. This new gang spawned the careers of Johnny Torrio and Al Capone.

Gangs of New York also was one of the few gangster films ever to pay homage to perhaps the most notorious street thug of the early twentieth century: the ape-like Monk Eastman. The screenwriter for this movie was off the mark by fifty years as the real Monk was born long after the Boss Tweed era. Oddly enough, this Finn MacCool was an Anglo Saxon Methodist who was incorrectly identified as being the son of a Russian Jewish rabbi by past historians of gangland. They did get it right that the Monk owned a pet shop and was a lover of animals. Monk is worth a feature film of his own, but he never rumbled for or against the Butcher or Ole Smoke. Eastman, a war

hero, died at the beginning of Prohibition. Neil Hanson's recent book, *Monk Eastman: the Gangster Who Became a War Hero*, has unearthed many unknown details about the notorious 19th century gangster. Monk and his Lower East Side gang that bore his name fought a relentless war for turf against Paul Powers, an Italian who had assumed an Irish alias, and his Five Points gang. Both Eastman and Powers surrounded themselves with colorful Irish roughnecks like "Eat 'Em Up" McManus and "Razor" Rielly.

Road to Perdition takes the gangster film back to the heyday of gangland during the wet years of Prohibition (1919-1933). However, *Road to Perdition* breaks new ground its' mise-en-scene. The cornfields and small towns of western Illinois and eastern Iowa replace the stockyards, the kitchen or the south end of the urban landscape. *Perdition*, following a pattern established in *On the Waterfront*, is more interested in the dynamics, squabbles and inter-squad feuding of the Irish gang as an extended family. John Rooney (Paul Newman), the Irish chieftain and father figure, is machine gunned down by Michael Sullivan (Tom Hanks), the Irish enforcer and son figure, after the two have effectively destroyed the other's family. Newman's character is based upon the career of John Patrick Looney (1865 to 1947), Al Capone's equal on the other side of the state. Looney controlled the booze, gambling and union rackets in the Quad Cities until he went to prison on a murder rap. Michael "the Angel of Death" Sullivan never existed as far as I can determine, but he fits in perfectly with the lone wolf Gael who took on the elites before they go down in a blaze of glory. He not only challenges his own gangland father and the might of the Midwestern syndicate, Sullivan is also fighting the evil forces and the power elite who had enshrouded the United States in the gloom of the Depression. In many ways, these Irish renegades echo the fallen heroes of Irish history: Brian Boru, Hugh (The Fighting Prince of Donegal) O'Donnell, Patrick Sarsfield and Michael Collins, all who fought and died for their lost cause.

The fictional Michael Sullivan, along with all of the real life Irish gangsters, are also have parallel connection to the Irish highwaymen who combed the highways and by-ways of Ireland in the middle of the 1600's until the early years of 1800's. Dunford has written about fifteen of these Irish highwaymen in his study, *The Irish Highwaymen* (2000). Robbers such as Captain Power, Brennan on the Moor and Cahir na gCapall (Charles of the horse) were dashing historical figures who were considered Robin Hood figures by the native Gaels during the terrible years of the Penal Laws. Most of these rapparees, like their American gangster, counterparts ended up on the wrong side of a brace of pistols or swinging at the end of the rope. Dunford wrote, "The sympathies of the masses of the native Irish were always with the rapparees...their activity is like a thread of light in a long, dark tunnel."

The movie that may represent the swan song of the real Irish American gangster could very well turn out to be *The Departed* Jack Nicholson's Francis Costello, the sleaziest of all cinematic godfathers, chews up the scenery as a demented stage Irishman and the last of the urban Celtic clan chieftains. Costello serves as the personification of every Irish American outlaw who ever lived: violent, generous, cheap, ballsy, cruel, shrewd and likeable in a creepy, dirty way. Francis Costello, a paradox of behaviors, also snorts coke, sells phony secret plans to the Chinese and rats out his fellow mobsters to the FBI. He is clearly a reworking of South Boston's very own Whitey Bulger, a Mickey Machine-Gun who almost single-handedly wiped out the Italian Mafia in Massachusetts as well as in Rhode Island. Whitey, who is considered by some crime scholars to be the last powerful Irish American crime boss, is currently Public Enemy Number One on the FBI's Most Wanted List. Mr. Bulger has been on the lam for years now. Nicholson's Francis Costello is executed by his own informant on the Boston police force (Matt Damon).

At this time I will make some passing comments on *Last Man Standing* (1996), starring Bruce Willis as John Smith, a mercenary who plays both sides of the Irish-Italian gang war on the Texas-

Mexican border during the waning years of Prohibition, this film being more influenced by Leone's *A Fistful of Dollars* than actual gangland history. In my opinion, the most notable character in this movie is Hickey (Christopher Walken), the top gun for the Doyle gang and a Mickey Machine-Gun filled with enough malice to burn down the orphanage that reared him. I always felt Hickey was patterned on George Segal's Pete Gussenberg in *The St. Valentine's Day Massacre*.

Since I wrapped up work on this paper, Hollywood released two more movies that belong in the *Mickey Machine Gun* canon: *The Town* (2010) and *Kill the Irishman* (2011). The latter film focuses upon the career of Cleveland's Danny Greene, a crazy Celtic union boss turned into an organized crime chief.

Danny Greene, who was essentially a one man wrecking crew, decreased the population of Cleveland's Italian American Mafia population during the Seventies before some New York assassins were successfully able to plant a bomb inside of his car. Danny as played by Ray Stevenson is presented as more like a fanatical IRA bomber than a modern day gangster.

Doug MacRay (Ben Affleck) and James Coughlin (Jeremy Renner) were a pair of heist men who work for Fergie Colm (Pete Postlethwaite), a flower shop owner in the heart of Charlestown, Boston, in *The Town*. I haven't found any concrete evidence that the movie was based upon any factual Irish American gang but it is true that Boston's Irish have provided the United States with its' most colorful bank robber since the Great Depression.

I would like to conclude with a personal opinion on the significance of the re-emergence of the Irish American gangster in Hollywood films here at the start of a new century. I am interested in why there is this sudden interest in the antics of the lowlife Irish past and present. I also ask the question of why the Irish Americans don't get up in arms when this rotten side of their cultural history is dug up and splashed across the silver screen for the whole world to see.

My conclusion would be that this is Irish America's last stab at outlawry before finally slipping inescapably into the great melting pot that is America. Perhaps the blazing fire of the American-Mulligan stew has already melted the Irish American beyond any unique cultural identity at this stage of history. The Irish American gangster film is the Irish American's last look backwards in time when they were the outsiders.

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Steven G. Farrell's books can be purchased at Amazon.com

Wonder Voyages upon Unmoving Clouds, poems, 1984

The Scousers, novel, 1995

Boston Knuckles, play, 2008

Zen Babe, novel, 2008

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