
Wilbur R. Miller

New York City's mid-19th century underworld: a history, a novel, a film

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- 1 New York City's mid-nineteenth century underworld has received considerable attention during the last two years. The «dangerous classes» and their neighborhoods are a major subject of Tyler Anbinder's history of the Five Points (the intersection of five streets in lower Manhattan, now covered by court buildings and Chinatown), and the characters and setting of Kevin Baker's novel and Martin Scorsese's film. A focal event in each is the 1863 Draft Riots, when poor New Yorkers disrupted military conscription during the Civil War, and expressed anger at emancipation of slaves, whom they feared would migrate north to take their jobs. They attacked not only the draft officials but also the rich, supporters of emancipation, and African-Americans themselves.
- 2 If you said «Five Points» in the mid-nineteenth century, everybody knew that was shorthand for the deepest poverty, foulest vice, and most vicious crime. In *Five Points* Tyler Anbinder is careful to correct sensationalized nineteenth century views, but also makes it clear that the area was indeed haunted by poverty, vice, and crime, though more of the first two than any serious crime. There were atrocious slums, whorehouses scattered everywhere, and saloons or «groceries» which sold dubious produce and equally dubious alcohol, on most corners. Quarrels and assaults, though few murders, were almost routine.
- 3 Despite the poverty and disorder, the largest male occupational category of «five pointers» was skilled manual workers (though in lowest-paid often seasonal categories), a few more there than the citywide average. What made the points distinctive was the large numbers of unskilled workers, almost twice the city average. The great majority of Irish immigrant men were unskilled workers, but only a small proportion of German immigrants. Most working women residents were in the needle trades, notoriously overworked and underpaid piece-rate workers. There were fewer house servants, the leading Irish women's occupation citywide, than in other areas where families could afford live-in «help» (ch. 4). Many of New York's small population of African-Americans lived in the points, but the neighborhood was not really «integrated». Blacks lived with the poorest Whites in distinct blocks, even buildings. Most pointers were poor, subject to seasonal fluctuations in work, easily thrown into abject poverty and alcoholism by loss of employment or diseases which scourged the neighborhood. Contemporaries declared the points to be much worse than London's Whitechapel «rookery».
- 4 Bad as things were, people found ways to entertain themselves. Politics was one form of entertainment, often involving free-for-all fights for possession of ballot boxes or to drive away rival voters. Street gangs were often associated with politicians and were the fighting arm of different factions. They also were ethnic, especially Irish vs «native» Americans. More conventional entertainment, bare-knuckle prize fights, combats between animals (both illegal but popular), and minstrel shows or «blood and thunder» plays could be found in local saloons or in more elaborate theatres along New York's working class entertainment center, the Bowery. As has so often happened in subsequent American popular culture, a distinctive form fusing Irish and Black dancing emerged from Five Points saloons – tap dancing, which melded Irish jigs and Black shuffles.
- 5 Anbinder chronicles the gradual «decline» of the points into an ordinary poor ethnic neighborhood after the Civil War, when pointers were prominent in the Draft Riots. Subsequent immigrants, Italians, Jews, Chinese, brought their own distinctive cultural styles to the neighborhoods, supplanting the old Irish and Black residents. Finally, reformers obliterated the old points by running streets through, demolishing tenements and creating a park. Much was gained, but Anbinder suggests, without nostalgia, that something was lost.

- 6 He does an excellent job of recreating the social, political and cultural complexities of a neighborhood nineteenth-century New Yorkers and Visitors categorized too simply as a hotbed of vice and crime. Each chapter begins with a prologue – a narration of a riot, an immigration story, a cultural event, or tale of an individual whose successful or failed life Anbinder recovers. He brings to life the Points and its diverse residents, good, bad, or disoriented.
- 7 Kevin Baker's novel, *Paradise Alley*, is a suspenseful tale of vengeance and quest that gives readers not only a good story, but a convincing feel for the lives of 19th century working and lower class New Yorkers. Ironically named Paradise Alley was a small street near Paradise Square, east of the Five Points. The area was similar to the more famous points, with the added attraction of a waterfront with its sailors, prostitutes who catered to them, and river pirates who stole from anchored ships. Three women are at the fictional center of the novel: Ruth Dove, a ragpicker, one of the lowliest trades in the city; Deirdre Dolan O'Kane, wife of an artisan struggling to maintain respectability; and Maddy Boyle, a prostitute and seller of hot corn on the streets. Each woman has her man. Ruth is married to Billy Dove, an African American shipbuilder who loses his job to become custodian of the Colored Orphans' Asylum, which was burned in the 1863 riots. Deirdre is married to Tom O'Kane, who goes off to fight in the Civil War and returns wounded. Maddy Boyle is maintained by Herbert Willis Robinson, a reporter for the city's leading newspaper, the *Tribune*.
- 8 Ruth is haunted by a monstrous sort of villain, Dangerous Jonny Dolan (brother of Deirdre), who saved himself and Ruth from starving during the Irish potato famine of 1848 by his wits and apparently a bit of cannibalism. Johnny, once Ruth's lover, mercilessly abused her. When he was charged with murder while committing a robbery, Ruth and Billy Dove, who was her new lover, had him drugged and shipped out of New York. Dolan would rather have remained in the city and to fight anybody trying to capture him. Jonny returns to New York for Ruth and Billy who he believed betrayed him. The story's suspense is maintained by his steadily closer approach to the city and his prey, and climaxed by his active role in the Draft Riots and mortal beating of Ruth. Ruth is not the only one who is hunted. Deirdre, nervously harboring both Ruth and Maddy, becomes a target of the fierce, explosive anger of the draft rioters which strikes out in all directions. After he beats Ruth, Dolan, a true villain, is soon done in by fellow crooks much to the reader's satisfaction. Each character has his or her odyssey or quest, which Baker narrates dramatically, capturing the flavor of New York along the way. The book is organized around these separate stories, presented within chronological chapters. This leads to a certain jumping from one tale to another, but Baker manages to do this without confusing the reader.
- 9 Baker's *Paradise Alley* brilliantly integrates fictional characters into history. Unlike many historical novels which are more concerned with character and plot development than accurate history, he is faithful to the latest historical work on New York City and the Draft Riots. Though he misses Anbinder, published a year earlier, he has a full bibliographical essay at the end. He also supplies a glossary of 19th century terms and Irish and New York City slang. As far as I know, Baker committed only one historical lapse: he describes a *roundsman* as a police patrolman, when that title actually refers to inspectors who looked out for disciplinary infractions among the beat cops, who derided them as «shoo flies». One error aside, this is an amazing feat of bringing both characters and history alive.
- 10 As a historian police and crime in mid-nineteenth century New York, I eagerly anticipated the Martin Scorsese's «Gangs of New York». Would it get things *right*? Would it offer memorable images of the Five Points? Would it be a *good story*?
- 11 The images are there, realized versions of 19th century engravings familiar from books of the era – complete with pigs rooting among the garbage, a scene in Kit Burns' rat pit, a prize fight on a raft in the Hudson to avoid the law, a fight among volunteer firemen while a building burns – perhaps the best of the vignettes the film offers. We also get a primer on 19th century slang, like Baker's glossary taken from Asbury's irresistible «Rogue's Lexicon», a nineteenth century publication by an ex-police chief: «the mort is frenchy», etc. On the other hand, some of the images are inaccurate. There is a public execution scene, but hangings were conducted

only within prison walls New York after 1835. The «Old Brewery» a notorious tenement which was taken over by a church group in the mid-1850s and converted to a mission, appears in the film, but as a curious maze of scaffolding and caves, more like an Orc's den from «Lord of the Rings» than the actual festering tenement it was. The gangs fight with weapons, odd shaped axes and knives, that also seem to have been borrowed from the Orcs. Street gang warfare was indeed violent, but contemporary news reports usually describe «cracked heads» rather than the bloody slaughter the movie revels in. Heads were usually cracked by the gang members' favorite weapon, the slung shot, which was a ball of lead shot in a sling, used like a black jack. This weapon does not, as far as I remember, appear in the film. Of course a gang with the wonderful name, «Dead Rabbits», had to appear, even though Anbinder says that there is no evidence to confirm its existence (pp. 284-286). The leading villain, Bill «the butcher» Cutting, was actually named Bill Poole and had been dead several years before the apparent time period of the film, killed in a bar fight that would be a farcical comedy of not so lethal. There are many such problems, enough to keep historians awake bemoaning what is given out as history to ordinary movie goers.

12 The story, like that in *Paradise Alley* is a tale of revenge, though less convincing than in Baker's novel partly because Leonardo Di Caprio as Amsterdam Vallon is not effective as the gang-leader son who rises up to avenge his father, «Priest Vallon», killed by Bill the Butcher. He is as vapid as usual, so the sense of a man driven to revenge is missing. Daniel Day-Lewis has been praised for his rendition of Bill the Butcher, largely because he is convincingly villainous. As Vincent De Girolamo points out in a forthcoming article (*Radical History Review*), he is really playing a 19th century melodrama *stage* villain, complete with curling mustaches that were not fashionable until several years later in the century. The Butcher character, especially with his constantly cutting up slabs of meat, is indeed menacing. He also has an unfulfilled psychological yearning, though in a conventional way – a powerful but lonely man yearning for a son. He is in the end betrayed by the son he seeks. He gets *his* revenge for the betrayal by branding De Caprio on the cheek, a serious disfiguring wound that miraculously heals during the rest of the film. Finally in a Western movie style one-on-one confrontation, while the Five Points are being historically inaccurately bombed during the Draft Riots, the son kills the would-be father, who then is allowed to utter a modified version of something the real Bill the Butcher said, « I die a true American.» With all the problems of this portrayal, Day-Lewis does effectively impersonate a true type of the period: the politico – volunteer fire chief – gang leader.

13 Gangs of New York» has all the faults of historical films that A.O. Scott, a critic for the *New York Times* (10 Aug. 2003, p. wk 4) described: «Chronology is warped, important details are changed, composite characters are invented, sprawling ambiguous narratives are shoehorned into the sacrosanct three-act structure.» Scorsese plays fast and loose with events and time sequences. He even distorts events and characters described in Asbury's book, itself regarded sceptically by historians. Some films, like «Glory», about African-American soldiers during the Civil War, manage to commit many of Scott's list of faults, but without obvious loss of the sense of sequence and meaning of events – they are at least in order, in proper relationship to each other even if within a shorter time frame.

14 Scorsese's movie and the Baker's novel are both dramas of characters' internal and external lives. Anbinder's history recovers names of people, though we can never know what they thought, and places them in the context of their social environment. Each offers a view of the mid 19th century underworld of New York City and the ordinary people who lived and worked in districts the underworld made notorious. Each has its own angle, the film and novel through personal stories, the history through vignettes and thorough analysis of quantitative and qualitative evidence. As historians we of course will turn to the history first, but the novel offers a compelling portrait of characters and their environment that is true to the history. The film, unfortunately, plays fast and loose with the history, as so often happens, and is not a particularly engaging story with whose characters we can empathize. Read the history and the novel if you want to learn about New York's underworld and be absorbed in good stories.

The film, despite all the promotions, did not last long in the theatres. You don't have to be a historian to see what's missing – a convincing story and well-developed characters.

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Droits d'auteur

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