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## Guest blogger: Professor Brian Ferguson on the real gangs of NYC

June 29, 2013 @ 4:00 am in GONY | Guest Bloggers | [Subscribe](#)

Brian Ferguson, an Anthropology Professor at Rutgers University, is today's Guest Blogger and he talks about the history of the earliest gangs in New York City. It's timely, as Martin Scorsese recently announced he's developing his film *Gangs of New York* into a TV series. [Read more about that here.](#)

Scorsese loosely adapted stories from Herbert Asbury's book 'The Gangs of New York' into his feature film and is developing the TV series to fill out the history and characters of the time. While he admits it's not based on all factual material, today's guest blogger is here to set the stories straight with his academic look at the history of New York's gangs.



Herbert Asbury's 1928 'The Gangs of New York'— the inspiration for a new television series by Miramax and Martin Scorsese—changed my life. When I was hired in 1983 to teach anthropology at Rutgers' Newark campus, I had to give one course in criminal justice. Anthropologists did not do criminal justice back then. So I came up with "Culture and Crime," and taught what I could find—Malinkowski on crime and custom in the Trobriand Islands, how the Inuit or Cheyenne responded to a homicide, etc. That was still well short of a semester. Then I came across Asbury's book, and that filled out the last weeks. Students loved it, and so did I.

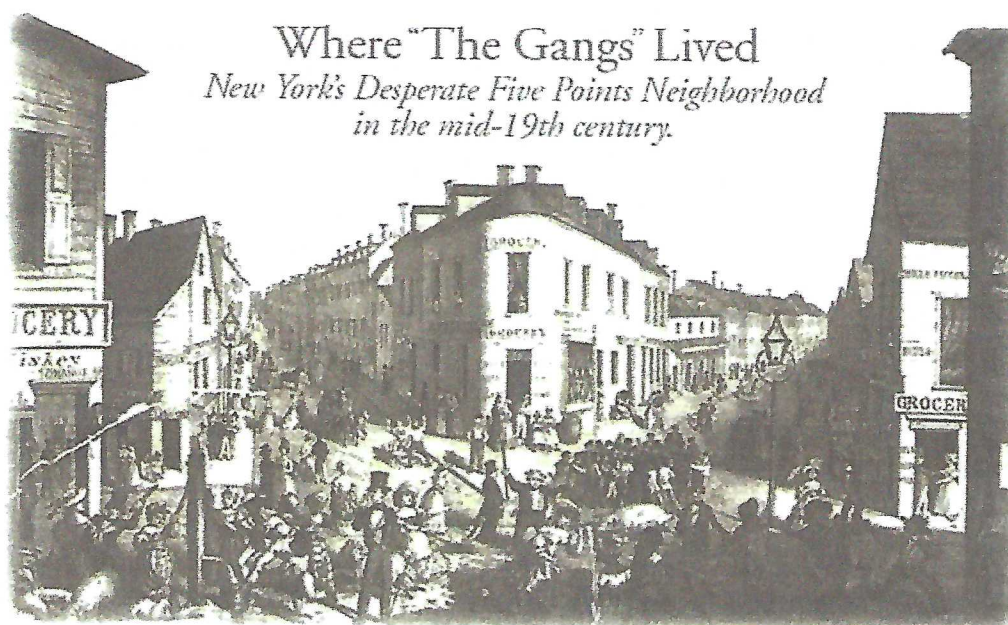
Teaching Asbury drew me into old New York, and each year I did more research about it. There was a lot published on cops—a major theme within Gangs—and after some years I was teaching “The Cultural History of the New York Police,” from the Dutch to the present. But gangs remained a running current. My interest began to focus on the question, how did 19th century neighborhood gangs turn into 20th century organized crime? So I became a specialist on 1895 to 1925, when the transition occurred. 1895 saw the mother of all police scandals, the Lexow investigation, exposing that the NYPD itself was organized crime in Gotham. Then came 20 years of reform, which pushed the police back to just grafters, rather than bosses.

Reform created the space for profit-oriented criminal organizations to develop. The first racket—where the word comes from—were “rackets,” big dances sponsored by street big men, when every shopkeeper knew to buy multiple tickets, or else. As the cops withdrew, prostitution and gambling came more under gangster control, with labor slugging and drugs following—and everything else there was. By the time Prohibition arrived, crime was a business, ready to cash in. Through all these years, Asbury’s “Informal History of the Underworld” was my starting point.

Anyone who reads Asbury asks, “where did he get all this stuff?”, and “is it true?” I’ve found many of his sources in older books and newspapers, especially nostalgic features about the bad old days. These were common in the 1920s, when contemporary gangsters were portrayed as desk-bound crooks wearing silk underwear. This nostalgia gave birth to Asbury’s classic tome. But Asbury got much of his information from the street. He spent years as a reporter for the New York Sun, Tribune, and Herald. When Asbury mentions old jokes still told on the Lower East Side, or battles that live on in police memory, he shows how many hours he spent in smoke-filled rooms and bars, jawing with old reporters, cops, gangsters and neighborhood folks, mining the gems.

Problem is, street memories fast turn into tales and legends. Even contemporary newspaper reports about street confrontations are often wrong, and must be triangulated with other information to get at an approximation of truth. Yet contemporary reports are much better than retrospectives. In my work, I find gross errors in facts can appear within five years of an event. Asbury’s sources were riddled with mistakes. Plus, he was not writing formal history. Asbury wrote to entertain, to sell books. He took liberties and exaggerated to make stories better. He simplified things, leaving out major events and players. I’m glad he did—otherwise this unique window on the Wild, Wild East might not exist, and the whole fascinating subject would be just a fog of unknowns.

Some mistakes in ‘Gangs of New York’ are important. One of the most famous of New York’s original gangsters in the first years of the 20th century was Paul Kelly, born Paolo Vaccarelli. Asbury (and every crime buff thereafter) has him leading the Five Points Gang, as some newspapers had been writing for years before Gangs of New York. Wrong. Kelly’s first gang was a personal following called “the Hoops,” with a headquarters on Mulberry and Kenmare, and a presence dominating Houston and the Bowery. Kelly became the protégé of Big Tim Sullivan, the up and coming downtown baron of Tammany Hall, the Democratic machine. In 1901 he founded the Paul Kelly Association. The Five Points gang was a wholly different group, centered in Chinatown and Chatham Square.



The Five Points Gang shows how New York gangdom was changing. They date back to the 1880s, at least, in the old Five Points neighborhood around Baxter and Mulberry Bend. To the degree they were criminal and not just neighborhood, they specialized in robbery, burglary, and pickpocketing. Theft required little more organization than a reliable fence. Mostly Irish, they loved to pummel cops, and the cops liked nothing better than to club gang men senseless. When slum clearance created what is now Columbus Park, the Five Pointers shifted into Chinatown, a major red-light and opium destination. Like all gangs, they earned political protection by repeating and slugging in elections. But under the iron rule of Tammany Boss Dick Croker, most elections were in the bag. Gangs were an essential part of the system, but less critical than when real vote fights were in play. Protection had its limits, and many men of the Five Points went to Sing Sing.

The natives and the Irish meet to do battle for Five Points.

By 1900, they like their neighborhood, were increasingly Sicilian, though Irish and others remained. It did matter where your people came from, but tough was trump. These later Five Pointers were into the rackets of the day, stealing of course, running their girl friends as prostitutes, taxing gambling, and working as shock troops for downtown power Big Tom Foley, namesake of Manhattan's courthouse district. In 1903 their top leader was Micky Irish, (which leaves his ethnicity open, since his successor was a Jew called Paddy Brock). Yet another main man was Tung Tung Bertini. Some of the most notorious names of the next decade began with the Five Points Gang, as did the future grand master Johnny Torrio.

Asbury says that for two years the Five Pointers "led by Paul Kelly" (not) were in constant war with Monk Eastman, "The Prince of the Gangsters." In striking contrast to most gangsterly correct young men who dressed to the nines, Monk was a classic and quotable thug. Contrary to Asbury, he was born William Delaney, and rose to prominence in 1901 as designated organizer of election roughs and repeaters for the Sullivan clan. Monk built a following from Chrystie to Essex Streets. Most Eastmans were Jewish, but Italian names are not rare, and some Eastmans were Black. His was not the evolution of an old gang, like the Five Pointers, but a creation of politicians, who needed street troops for a new era of struggle within Tammany Hall.

Asbury tells how gang power could elect or topple democrats vying for control of Assembly Districts, the powerful District Leaders. In 1901, old school Tammany D.L. Paddy Divver in the 2nd District was overthrown when his own street fighters slept late and were trounced by men from outside the District backing upstart Tom Foley. The invaders included Five Pointers and Paul Kelly men—which I suspect is why their association was later confused—plus Eastmans and others. New York was stunned by the intensity of this fighting, far beyond the usual election fraud. So was the Lower East Side, which had enjoyed comparative civility for a while.

The golden age of gang warfare began with the opening shot of new Tammany wars. Divver was with Boss Croker, and his defeat by Foley, with Sullivan support, marked the start of Croker's fall. When the Boss quit in 1902, fighting got intense. Who would be the next Boss? Victory depended on who could line up or conquer the most Assembly Districts. (The Sullivans owned two, "de Sixt" and "de Ate"). There were layers of contenders, and alignments could change overnight. Heads rolled, and double cross was the name of the game. Fights between gangs with political patrons were not just feuds over women, turf, status, or insults. Some were proxy wars.

Johnny shows Amsterdam around town, pointing out everything from the occupying gangs to a vivacious redhead named Jenny.

My day job is studying war, mostly among "tribal" peoples. For more than three decades I've investigated why, where, when, and between whom they occur. My book *Yanomami Warfare*, about the famous and supposedly "fierce people" of the Venezuela-Brazil highlands, shows that while they seem to fight over personal grievances that Monk Eastman could understand, actual practice shows a clear pattern: their wars arise out of competition for better access to steel tools and other Western goods, that quickly became necessities. That is how I look at wars of the Lower East Side—what larger context shapes the fighting?

The Eastmans were at war with the Five Pointers, not for two years, but for two weeks, in September and early October 1902. It began with a major provocation by Tung Tung Bertini and company, who crashed an Eastman racket (dance) and stole the girl (and meal ticket) of Monk's lieutenant. Ambushes and invasions followed back and forth, with three dead and many other casualties. The feud ended with publicized negotiations conducted by District Leader Tom Foley. Peace was declared, and the two gangs became best buddies, having their annual outing jointly the next July, and happily shellacking cops together.

What was this outbreak really about? Tammany back rooms and saloons left no minutes. But September was the peak of conflict over Tammany leadership. Big Tim, and so presumably the Eastmans, backed Silent Charlie Murphy; while Foley, and so the Five Pointers, backed Murphy's rival. Murphy won, but people were sore, and the leadership question was far from settled. Interpretation is straightforward—this war started with Foley asserting his strength with the Five Pointers, then retaliation by the Sullivans with the Eastmans, and then everybody cut deals and got back to business.

That was just the beginning of Monk's wars, as Tammany continued to boil. The first—overlooked by Asbury—involved the Yakey Yakes. Named after the charismatic Yakey Yakey Brady, they grew out of another legendary ruffian gang, the Cherry Hills, from under the shadow of the Brooklyn Bridge. As described by a decidedly unsympathetic reporter in 1890, "the members of the Cherry Hill gang seem to do nothing but fight and drink. They steal, of course, but they do so only to enable them to drink." No organized crime there. Like the old Five Points area, Cherry Hill was changing too, and the community was riven with tension. In 1901, a seven year-old associated with the juvenile Spaghetti gang was beaten and shot by youngsters of the Shamrock gang. The grown-up Yakey Yakes seem to be largely Irish, and in March 1903 they picked a fight with the Eastmans.

Bad move. The Eastmans invaded in force, with an OK Corral shootout across a street in the heart of Cherry Hill. Then the Five Points Gang joined in, though their position is murky. What really stands out, however, is how Tammany cops and magistrates made common cause. The cops occupied Cherry Hill, itching to beat down anyone who showed the slightest bravado. With several Yakey Yakes in the hospital, 13 more were arrested, and—big surprise—given a month in jail instead of being turned loose. The Yakey Yakes were defanged.

What were the politics? Well, it's complicated—very complicated. Cherry Hill spanned two Assembly Districts, Foley's 2nd, and the 4th, where John Ahearn was District Leader. Ahearn, a long-time Tammany stalwart, also represented the 4th and two other Lower East Side Districts in the NY Senate, including Foley's 2nd. Ahearn supported Paddy Divver against Foley, and more recently supported Murphy in his battle with Foley's candidate for leadership of Tammany Hall. Foley wanted to replace Ahearn with his own man. Despite Murphy's pleas, Big Tom knocked off Ahearn as Democratic nominee for the State Senate. Ahearn was furious and ready to fight. Republicans encouraged him to run for Senate with their backing. But he didn't, and in July 1903, Murphy promised to reward him with the lucrative office of sheriff. Foley was said to believe that the Yakey Yakes were part of the gang armistice he'd negotiated in the previous October. That the Yakey Yakes picked the fight, and that Eastmans, Five Pointers, cops, and court united against the Yakeys suggest that their provocations in March were a move by Ahearn. Yet in July, Ahearn was "being good."

In this dynamic political field, many scenarios can be imagined. Maybe, after being knifed by Foley, Ahearn tried rebellion, but following the crushing reaction opted to get along. But I could find no evidence to support that. The intriguing possibility is that this war marks the start of gangs slipping the leash of their political masters.

The Sullivans and others created Monk Eastman, Paul Kelly, and many lesser lights. By fostering a channel for the built-in violence of New York's life-extinguishing slums, they opened Pandora's Box. Politicians elevated gang leaders, and cultivated greater organization, but their creations had lives, interests, and grudges of their own. And now New York presented new vistas of criminal opportunity. After one State investigation, blue-blood citizens committee, and short-lived reform administration after another, the cops and politicians were no longer the masters of prostitution, gambling, extortion, swindles, and fencing. In time, criminal organizations would come to control Tammany, rather than the reverse. The Yakey Yakey attacks may be the messy start of that metamorphosis.

Gang wars got worse, and worse. In July 1903, Monk's men went after two gangs on one very liquored-up night, the Davey Bernsteins (probably) and the Paul Kellys, including a notorious shootout under the EI on Rivington Street. Another bad move. Paul Kelly was not just Big Tim Sullivan's commander of election toughs, he was like a son. Monk worked for cash, and did as he pleased. He was becoming too independent—such as attacking the Paul Kelly's—which is likely why the powers-that-be let him be sent up the river February 1904.

And the criminal stakes? Eastman pioneered labor slugging, supporting unions or employers during strikes. Labor slugging grew fast, with violent territorial disputes, until Dopey Benny Fein put some order in it around 1913. Paul Kelly was into everything, and by 1902 expanding his empire all over Manhattan and even Jersey. Kelly placed a new headquarters right at the edge of the Eastmans' stomping grounds—a shot across Monk's bow. Contemporary points of contention are not reported, but may be surmised from a deadly 1907 fight between the Five Pointers and Eastmans (then led by Kid Twist Zweifach), when the former claimed to protect a gambling house in Eastman territory.

Subsequent street wars were over profit, and included a new tactic that would have been considered cowardly in the old school-targeted shootings, for control of the Yakey Yakes, for control of the post-Eastman Eastmans, between Five Pointers and Eastmans, and between Paul Kellys and Five Pointers. In another story line, 1903 saw extortionists under the sign of the Black Hand terrorizing the Italian community, and the Mafia jump from the shadows by stuffing a mutilated corpse in a barrel and dumping it in a vacant lot. From then on, organized murder was routine, though sometimes flaring into maelstroms. Gangs were out of political control. In 1911, Big Tim himself rammed through the Sullivan Act, NYC's tough gun law today, but it didn't stop the shooting. New York's gangster era had begun.



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