

A Review of English's Paddy Whacked

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Book Review I

Paddy Whacked: The Untold Story of the Irish American Gangster

By T.J. English



Reviewed by Caitlin Eileen Docherty '12

When thinking of the history of organized crime in America over the past two hundred years, for many, the first images to appear in the mind are that of the infamously well known organizations such as the Italian Cosa Nostra, the Russian Mafia and gangs such as the Bloods and Crips, as well as the Latin Kings. What most people frequently overlook is the ruthless Irish Mob, which boasts the membership of some of the most dangerous men and women (yes, there were female mobsters) ever to do business in the criminal underworld of the United States.

T.J. English's non-fiction book *Paddy Whacked: The Untold Story of the Irish American Gangster* recounts the true story of the Irish Mob, beginning in the 1800's when "The Great Irish Famine," the deadly combination of crop failure and exploitation under British imperialism which began in 1845 and lasted until 1852, caused a wave of Irish immigration to the United States. This influx of Irish expatriates lasted throughout the rest of the 1800's and had an enormous impact on American society.

English debunks the misconception that the origin of mobs in America can be solely traced back to that of the Italian Mafia (aka Cosa Nostra, literally "Our Thing") of the island of Sicily. The Irish Mob was centered on a corrupt political machine known as the Tammany Society, which provided poor immigrants with food and money in exchange for votes. Through the Tammany Society, the Irish had a foothold in American politics before any other immigrant group, and their feats in organized crime include political corruption, prostitution, bootlegging, breaking/entering, murder for hire, and various other less than moral practices.

Formed out of necessity for food, protection and belonging, the Irish Mob caused hell for the predominantly Anglo-Saxon American government. English illustrates the lives of the colorful, although sometimes brutal, Irish gangsters such as John Morrissey, Danny Lyon, Danny Driscoll, and Tim Sullivan (to name a few), and makes several controversial insinuations about the role of Bobby Kennedy and the Mob in the election of President John F. Kennedy. On certain occasions, English seems to try to make up for the deplorable acts committed by these mobsters, seemingly feeling empathy for their

struggles, stating early on in his book that they are simply part of the lowly people trying to make a living in the “brutal, dog-eat-dog reality of the American Dream.”

One small detail to be noted is how English often falls prey to the mysterious allure of the mobsters, romanticizing their lives and endeavors in a way that makes them seem justified in, if not entitled to, committing their respective crimes. However, although he does seem to idealize the lives of crime lead by the Irish mobsters (in a sort of “steal from the rich and give to the poor” type of fashion), he maintains historical accuracy and is true to his purpose for writing the book i.e., to narrate the untold story of the Irish Mob and how they influenced the structure of organized crime in America up to this very day.

Paddy Whacked is a fascinating story, and I highly recommend this book to readers of all ages and backgrounds, although it is particularly interesting to those who hail from the New York/New Jersey area, as many scenes from the book are set against the backdrop of this region such as Manhattan’s West Side, St. Vincent’s Hospital, the Five Points (the most notable of those five connecting streets is Canal Street), Harlem, as well as speakeasies in Newark and Brooklyn.

From the stark and gloomy fields of famine-ravished Ireland to the tough city streets of Hell’s Kitchen, English’s book does a perfect job of documenting the harrowing story of the Irish Mob and the people who patronized it, while maintaining the poetic and attention-capturing style of a true Irish storyteller. His ingenious work, *Paddy Whacked: The Untold Story of the Irish American Gangster*, is an illuminating masterpiece that will inspire and entertain the reader from start to finish.

New York: Regan Books, 2005.

Pp. 468. \$27.95

Genre: Irish-American History