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Peter Quinn

Who's the Boss?

King of the Bowery

Big Tim Sullivan, Tammany Hall, and New York City from the Gilded Age to the Progressive Era

Richard F. Welch

Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, \$50, 224 pp.

King of the Bowery is a lively, scholarly account of the life and times of Timothy J. Sullivan, AKA Big Tim—a moniker that described Sullivan's physical and political presence and distinguished him from his cousin and consigliere, Little Tim. It is also a necessary book for anyone unsatisfied by the usual histories of Irish-American urban political machines, which reduce some of the most successful and long-lived political operations in U.S. history to a tale of Caesarean simplicity: They came, they saw, they stole. (The coda hardly needs stating: good riddance.)

The Irish-American boss has rarely been awarded careful appraisal of the kind that Welch, a historian at C. W. Post College of Long Island and the author of several well-regarded books, gives Sullivan. In *Mysteries of My Father*, Tom Fleming provided an intimate picture of the Jersey City machine, and William Kennedy's rendering of the Albany machine in his novel *Roscoe* is brilliant and far superior, in my judgment, to *The Last Hurrah*, Edwin O'Connor's romantic fantasy about the last days of Boston's James Michael Curley. (The real skinny on Curley is laid out with great detail and insight in Jack Beatty's *The Rascal King*.)

As a general rule, however, the bosses ("If I were a Republican they'd call me a leader," complained Tom Prendergast, the leader/boss of Kansas City) have been more invoked than analyzed, their collective specter an ever-potent reminder of the bad old days of the *ancien machine* before the enlightened classes profes-

sionalized government and a college degree came to be seen as a prerequisite for public office. For example, in *The Tiger*, a well-written if standard retelling of Tammany Hall's rise and fall, Oliver Allen framed the lasting value of the machine in the reaction it engendered. "Finally, history caught up with the Hall," he concluded. The electorate caught on and put an end to its epic thievery. "Honest graft once seemed almost proper, but then conflict-of-interest laws banned it." (Whether it cured or even reduced it is another matter.)

Gradually, a revisionist movement has begun to push back against such one-dimensional accounting. Kenneth Ackerman's fine 2005 biography *Boss Tweed* underlines that Tweed and his ring, often regarded as prototype and nonpareil of political thievery, were in sync with their times. In 1873, as Tweed underwent trial and conviction and Mark Twain branded an entire era with the title of his novel *The Gilded Age*, the collapse of Jay Cooke's much-hyped Northern Pacific Railroad set off a financial panic and the Credit Mobilier revelations exposed the

depth of corruption in President Ulysses Grant's administration. (Tweed stands out for the fact that he was one of the very few players in any of these schemes to see the inside of a jail cell.)

Walt Whitman summed up the meta-partisan ethic of the kleptocracy this way: "The depravity of the business classes of our country is not less than has been supposed but infinitely greater. The official services of America, national, state, and municipal, in all their branches and departments...are saturated in corruption, bribery, falsehood, and mal-administration."

Without excusing or minimizing the Boss's grand larcenies, Ackerman made clear that Tweed was more than a mere plunderer. A Protestant who'd flirted with nativism, Tweed brought the Irish immigrant poor into the political process. Instead of regarding them as a threat to be confronted and policed, he offered them assistance and work, gave their concerns a venue for expression, and never condescended. To reformers, he would always be the poster child for civic villainy. To the Irish poor, many of whom



Tammany Hall, West 14th Street, New York City, 1914

recalled the Famine not as distant folk memory but as searing personal experience of starvation, desperation, eviction, emigration, and discrimination, Tweed would remain a hero.

To be fair, the Tammany chiefs who followed Tweed didn't make it easy for historians to fill in the blanks and develop a rounded portrait of their thinking and actions. Even when they weren't as devoutly taciturn as Charles Francis Murphy, who earned the title "The Silent Boss," the chiefs and sachems of Tammany were not apostles of public disclosure. Nancy Joan Weiss made a valiant effort to overcome this obstacle in her brief and groundbreaking 1968 study, *Charles Francis Murphy, 1854-1924: Respectability and Responsibility in Tammany Politics*. Weiss rescued Murphy from gray memory as the boss who mentored Al Smith and battled William Randolph Hearst. (In *Citizen Kane*, Orson Welles's fictionalized version of Hearst's life, the Murphy-like boss, played by character actor Ray Collins, is named Jim Gettys.) Weiss made clear the central role Murphy played in framing and enacting the sweeping agenda of social legislation and progressive reform in New York State that became the model for the New Deal.

King of the Bowery takes this process of revisionism a very large step forward. Welch gives us a boss in full: politician, gambler, progressive, grafter, promoter, and protector of all the amusements, licit and otherwise, that flowered along the Bowery. (Sullivan vehemently denied being involved in prostitution, which doesn't mean he wasn't an accommodating friend to those who were.) As well as King of the Bowery, many awarded him another crown: King of the Underworld.

When he ran for Congress in 1902, the editorialists at the *New York Times* were apoplectic, fulminating that Sullivan's candidacy was inconceivable "anywhere outside a Tammany barroom" and that he was "simply not fit to be elected in a civilized community." Big Tim gave it right back. "I ain't afraid of any newspaper," he said. "My opponents will hold me up

to ridicule on my mannerisms. But they are the mannerisms of the people. And they are the mannerisms of your children and your children's children." The people gave him the election by an uncivilized (at least it must have seemed that way to the *Times*) three-to-one margin.

The roots of Big Tim's machine and of the Tammany machine it was part of—as well as of its Irish-American counterparts in other cities—were in the catastrophic potato famine that overwhelmed Ireland in the 1840s. The Sullivans were among the thirteen thousand tenants on the County Kerry latifundia of the Marquis of Lansdowne, a population routinely described by observers as "half naked," "half fed," and "wretched." In December 1850, faced with the expense of maintaining starving, destitute tenants in the local poorhouse, the Marquis paid to have them shipped to America. They arrived in a condition, writes one historian, "that even jaded New Yorkers found appalling."

The Sullivans and their neighbors knew firsthand the consequences of being disorganized and powerless, at the mercy of aristocrats, proselytizers, moral reformers, economic theorists, those with the desire and means to control their destinies. There were no academies to teach them strategies for collective survival. A deeply rural people suddenly thrust into the lower intestines of one of the fastest-growing cities on earth, lacking the capital, skills, and education to storm the Anglo-Saxon bastions of finance and big business, they had one potent weapon: the vote.

Finding themselves in a hostile environment and faced with a growing nativist reaction, the Irish recognized that survival depended on organization. They invested huge amounts of money, effort, and time in constructing what was, in effect, a parallel social system, building their own churches, funding schools and charitable institutions, staffing religious orders, and founding unions and fraternal societies.

Nowhere was this passion for organization more obvious than in politics. Among the members and supporters of Tammany Hall, in fact, the preferred

term of self-reference wasn't "the machine" but "the Organization." In the words of Little Tim: "Organization, to be effective in representation as well as action, must mean organization all year round." Welch estimates that Tammany's district captains could field about ninety thousand precinct workers in a normal election year.

No scholar I know of has examined Tammany's roots in Ireland, especially in the intense culture war that raged there in the wake of Catholic emancipation. But in her deeply researched book, *The Bible War in Ireland: The Second Reformation and the Polarization of Protestant-Catholic Relations, 1800-1840*, historian Irene Whalen writes that, as a result of the mounting pressure brought on Catholics to convert, "creation of a fortress structure to protect its flock from assimilation" became the "first prerogative" of the church in Ireland and its counterpart in America. Similarly, like the church, the machine was a redoubt, a place where the Irish immigrant community could resist dissolution and assimilation, regroup, and move forward on its own terms.

In the beginning, the machine's main purpose was defensive: keeping power out of the hands of its nativist and upper-class enemies. Getting elected was a means as well as an end. The lack of a coherent political philosophy to define and drive the machine has often been taken as a sign of the intellectual poverty of the bosses. In Daniel Patrick Moynihan's famous formulation, they knew how to get power but not what to do with it once they had got it.

The traditional view of the Irish-American machine as a rapacious tiger, with a large appetite and a little brain, overlooks two important facts. First, in getting and retaining power, the machine kept it out of the hands of mostly Protestant upper-class reformers and middle-class "goo-goos" (Tammany's term for "good government" advocates) who were often condescending and contemptuous of those they targeted for material improvement, moral uplift, and social control.

As Steven Hahn makes clear in *A*

Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration, the so-called Redemption that overthrew Reconstruction in the South and resulted in drastic curtailment of African-American voting rights had its Northern counterpart among Brahmin intellectuals who fretted about the need to restrict the franchise and called for "purifying" the ballot box, "cleansing" the electorate, and securing the 'educated' in their proper place as the governing class."

Second, the machine didn't stand still. It evolved. In the beginning it was enough for it to serve as a quasi-social-service agency whose grafting and stealing were overlooked by its followers, a substantial number of whom were its beneficiaries. Among the well-to-do and the business community, there were many who, though they loathed the machine's personalities and practices, appreciated its generally cooperative quid-pro-quo attitude and its aversion to working-class radicalism or the kind of incendiary politics that could lead the "dangerous classes" to a repetition of the disastrous Draft Riots of 1863. For their part, the bosses were smart enough to intuit that radicalism was far more likely than corruption to bring prosecution and imprisonment.

But times changed, and so did the machine. Eventually, it threw in its lot with those progressives and liberals who wanted to bring capitalism, not down, but under control. (It was this alliance—more than anything else—that made the welfare state possible and rendered the machine obsolete, leaving the Tiger a stuffed and mounted exhibit in a dust-covered museum hall.)

The story of this remarkable transformation is at the heart of Welch's enlightening and absorbing book. Big Tim not only embodied the Irish-American transition from outsiders to insiders but helped bring it about. "Profoundly Irish by birth, heritage, and experience," writes Welch, "[Sullivan] held little in the way of ethno-religious prejudices and took people as he found them. Brought up in abject poverty

himself, his worldview was refracted through a prism of class consciousness that owed nothing to theory and ideology and everything to experience and practicality."

By the time Big Tim came along the Irish were a dwindling presence in the crowded wards of the Lower East Side. But like other Tammany leaders, including Johnny Ahern, Al Smith, and Jazz Age mayor Jimmy Walker, this bothered Big Tim not at all: "If he found non-Irishers with the talents he valued he showed no hesitation in placing them in command of election districts. Soon a number of his captains were Germans, Jews, or Italians whose rapport with their brethren kept the Bowery Democratic and instilled a sense of loyalty to Sullivan that transcended ethnic and religious divisions." (Among his protégés was legendary gambler and racketeer Arnold Rothstein, the model for Meyer Wolfsheim in *The Great Gatsby*.)

Like a feudal baron, Big Tim was content to rule his own fiefdom and to be a kingmaker rather than king. His largesse was truly baronial. Remembering his own childhood poverty, he provided free shoes to schoolchildren and held massive Christmas dinners for the down-and-out.

Above all, Big Tim never tired in his preference for experience over theory. His support for women's suffrage owed nothing to abstract notions of human equality. He was an advocate of equal rights because, having witnessed the struggle of his mother and sisters, he recognized that "without the vote, especially in the lower walks of life, the women don't have a chance. If anyone wants anything it is the man who gets it, because he has the vote." His dismissal of a proposal to close Coney Island on Sundays was as succinct as it was sage: "The most ridiculous thing that I ever heard of. It is a case of eleven thousand people trying to wag 2 million, and it cannot succeed."

Perhaps the finest tribute Big Tim ever received came in 1938, twenty-five years after his death, from a former colleague in the New York State Senate, a Harvard-educated patrician who began his

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career with an active disdain for crude, low-class pols of the Tammany ilk. Now, on the eve of World War II, President Franklin Roosevelt was visited by Frances Perkins, the first woman cabinet secretary, who pleaded for a loosening of the immigration quotas preventing many Jewish refugees from entering the country. Perkins had known both Sullivan and FDR in their Senate days. While impressed by Big Tim, she recalled FDR as "just an ordinary, intelligent, and correct young man."

The personal and passionate nature of Perkins's pleas, said FDR, put him in mind of their mutual acquaintance from years before:

"Tim Sullivan," he recalled to Perkins, "used to say that the America of the future would be made out of the people who had come over in steerage and who knew in their own hearts and lives the difference between being despised and being accepted and liked." The president paused for a few seconds, and then went on: "Poor old Tim Sullivan never understood about modern politics, but he was right about the human heart."

Large as Big Tim once loomed in the life of New York City, memory of him quickly shrank to a few traces: an ordinance against carrying concealed weapons that still bears his name, and the eastern end of Delancey Street, renamed Kenmare to honor the Irish village in which his beloved mother was born (and where, during the Famine, the dead lay unburied in the streets). With *King of the Bowery*, Richard Welch has rescued Big Tim from undeserved obscurity and given him his due as "the last great—greatest—practitioner of nineteenth-century urban politics."

But caveat lector: you don't have to be an Irish American or a New Yorker or a Democrat to enjoy this book. All you have to be is interested in a well-told story that is also a first-rate work of history. ■

Peter Quinn, a frequent contributor, is the author of *Looking for Jimmy*, a collection of essays on the Irish-American experience, and the novels *Hour of the Cat* and *Banished Children of Eve*.

Charles R. Morris

Oops

The Great Inflation and Its Aftermath

The Past and Future of American Affluence

Robert J. Samuelson
Random House, \$26, 311pp.

Book publishing schedules are cruel. Robert J. Samuelson, a *Newsweek* columnist and self-confessed "slow writer," most likely started on this book in 2005 or so when the economy was booming. He would have turned in the final manuscript about a year and a half ago as the yawning cracks in Wall Street's underpinnings were first becoming clearly visible.

Samuelson's primary topic is what he calls the "Lost History" of the great inflation of 1968–82, and its subjugation by the combined efforts of former Federal Reserve Chairman Paul A. Volcker and President Ronald Reagan. He overstates the extent to which the episode has been forgotten—the *Wall Street Journal* has used it as a bogeyman against all forms of government intervention ever since. But *The Great Inflation* may be the first popular book devoted entirely to the subject, and Samuelson is surely right that it is a critical period in recent economic history.

The history of the buildup of the inflationary infection and its eventual conquest is accurate and complete, al-

though oddly organized. Through the first half of the book, Samuelson treats inflation as if it were solely a matter of government fiscal and monetary policy, as many conservative economists do. It is only after he has finished that story that he flashes back, a bit awkwardly and too briefly, to more fundamental causes relating to the privileged position of American business in the first three-quarters of the twentieth century.

America's leading companies rapidly outstripped their European competitors starting in the late nineteenth century, achieving near-global dominance by about 1913. But from that point they quickly settled into a comfortable world of managed competition and "administered," or cartelized, pricing. Except for the entry of companies in entirely new industries like television and airlines, the roster of the top hundred companies barely changed until the 1980s.

But that sustained success didn't stem from U.S. competitiveness. It was mostly because their global peers regularly blew each other up. American companies emerged from the two world wars not only unscathed but as virtually the sole suppliers to former combatants. By the 1950s, big U.S. companies and their unions were lolling in a lazy world of "planned obsolescence," locked-in wage/price increases, and falling productivity. It was only after the furious competitive assault from the Japanese and Germans



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