

A Roundup of Bootleggers and Other Criminals

Robert McColley

The Bootlegger: A Study of Small-Town America. By John E. Hallwas. (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998. Pp. 288. Illustrations: Maps, 33 photographs, 5 linecuts. Cloth, ISBN 0-252-02395-1. \$24.95)

A Knight of Another Sort: Prohibition Days and Charlie Birger, 2nd Edition. By Gary DeNeal. (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1998. Map and 72 photographs. Pp. 332. Paper, \$16.95.)

To Serve and Collect: Chicago Politics and Police Corruption from the Lager Beer Riot to the Summerdale Scandal, 1855-1960. By Richard C. Lindberg. (Southern Illinois University Press, 1998. Maps, photographs, cartoons, charts, tables, and lists. Pp. 389. Paper, \$19.95.)

Books and other works of art ought to age for awhile before being pronounced classics, but the entirely new book here, John Hallwas' *Bootlegger*, has all the qualities of a literary and historical classic. With its second edition, we can surely pronounce Gary DeNeal's *Knight of Another Sort* a classic, and, so also with this paperback reprint of Richard C. Lindberg's uneven but also incomparably informative and interesting *To Serve and Collect*. All three belong on one's shelf of books about crime in Illinois, along with Herbert Asbury's *Gem of the Prairie* and Paul Angle's *Bloody Williamson*.

The central protagonist of *The Bootlegger* is Henry, nicknamed Kelly, Wagle (1886-1929), Western Illinois' foremost distributor of illegal beverages during the age of Prohibition. But there is much more here than the life of a criminal from a small midwestern community. The sub-title, *A Story of Small-Town America*, refers to the history, covering almost a century, of Colchester, Illinois, now a "bedroom suburb" of Macomb in McDonough County. Hallwas presents us with a panorama of colorful characters, determined to make this town into

a thriving and rich city. For industry there was mining of coal and clay, and the manufacture of pottery. For trade there were general stores, clothing stores, hardware stores, finally dealers in agricultural machinery and automobiles, and an elegant movie theater. The railroad promised prosperity in the later 19th century, and paved roads promised it again in the early twentieth. But both, eventually, merely passed through Colchester on their way to more important places. The abundance of judiciously selected facts about Colchester and its history reward even the reader who chiefly wishes to trace the career of Kelly Wagle, for everything is set in a context that gives depth and vitality to the story. The book has yet another dimension: Hallwas begins his narrative with the funeral of Kelly Wagle, and then creates the suspense of a superior whodunit by withholding the circumstances of the bootlegger's death until the end of the book. Furthermore, in a fascinating subplot, he generates more suspense over the mysterious disappearance of one of Wagle's wives.

David DeNeal's "knight" is Charlie Birger (1883-1928), the most colorful of the gangsters who helped shape the violent legends of Southern Illinois. DeNeal and Hallwas have both made fruitful, lifelong studies of their regions. But the landscape and people of Illinois' Egypt, though deftly drawn, serve as background for the action and events in DeNeal's book. Birger is never far from stage center, and his life, crimes, and final punishment are what this book is about. Sometimes, as when the Birger gang was defending the right to drink from the rampaging Ku Klux Klan and the wild S. Glenn Young, one might feel this bootlegger was on the side of the angels. But Birger killed too easily, or ordered others to kill on his behalf. His life ended on the gallows, one of the last criminals to be hanged in Illinois. DeNeal, like Hallwas, spent years running down the details of his story, often by interviewing participants who managed to survive and tell tales many decades after events that they dared not tell earlier.

Although there have been many colorful histories of crime in Chicago, some of the best by Lindberg himself, *To Serve and Collect* is unique both in its panoramic view of a full century and more, and in its central focus on the police rather than the criminals. The theme

proclaimed by the title is that throughout this century and more the police have often contributed to crime, or enriched themselves from crime, while pretending to combat it. The title also propounds the thesis that Chicago politics always has much to do with the city's crime, and that reformers, inside and outside the police department – mostly serious, honest, competent, and ready to regroup to "clean up the city" – could never quite succeed. His pessimism is by no means oppressive, however. Lindberg does believe the Chicago Police Department has improved.

Of the three authors, only Hallwas dwells at any length on economic hard times; the industrial operations around Colchester rarely succeeded for long. But even Hallwas makes it clear that poverty was not the primary force driving Kelly Wagle to a life of crime; he came from a family otherwise willing to work hard and make do with modest living. More to the point, men with Wagle's intelligence and strength could and did succeed in honest lines of work. So too with Charlie Birger, the son of honest Russian Jewish immigrants. In sociological terms, there is nothing about their culture that explains the criminal career of these men. Lindberg gives us a vast cast of characters; though we can never learn as much about them individually as we learn about Wagle and Birger, we know enough to realize that the policemen and politicians who protected lawbreakers in exchange for payoffs did so out of greed rather than necessity.

Another instructive lesson: America's most catastrophic failure in social engineering, the 18th Amendment, may have made the 1920s roar with the motors of large armored cars and the chatter of Thompson sub-machine guns, but organized crime, and turf-wars among criminals plagued the nation long before 1920 and long after 1933. Even when the manufacture, sale, and consumption of alcoholic beverages was perfectly legal, criminals found ways to make money illegally by selling to minors, by running booze into dry counties, and especially by operating after-hours dives featuring gambling or prostitution. While it is debatable whether or how much anyone needs sex, alcohol, or gambling, there is no denying the wide-

spread appetite for all three. Small wonder that a large, complex, and highly mobile society has produced, for centuries, a conflict between the guardians of social order and purity on the one hand, and the purveyors of exciting vice on the other. With far fewer people in Southern or Western Illinois than in Chicago, there were proportionally fewer politicians and policemen, but their problem with regard to vice was much the same: many of them liked the occasional friendly drink, a wager on a horse race, and a game of poker, and perhaps even the company of ladies of the night. It was all too easy to see these activities as victimless crimes, or not really crimes at all. Easy too, to accept gifts of appreciation from an apparently benign, even socially useful underworld. Or one might be without temptation, accept no bribes, and yet regard commercial vice as inevitable and therefore more to be regulated than suppressed: try to keep the games more or less honest, the drinks free of Mickey Finns, the customers as safe as circumstances permit.

For many enjoying the profits of light corruption worked well enough. But others started down a slippery slope. Condoning bootlegging, gambling and prostitution led to condoning kidnapping, murder, and forced prostitution. Thus policeman Lory Price in Williamson County, attempting to be friendly with Charlie Birger's gang, came to know too much and wound up as a corpse. And so did his innocent wife.

One more theme emerges from all of these books: whatever their ethnic background, and whether in great cities or rustic towns, the ruthless and often reckless men who rose to the top, however briefly, seem to have yearned for respectability as well. This was certainly true of Kelly Wagle in Colchester, Charlie Birger in Harrisburg, and Dion O'Bannion in Chicago. Even Al Capone had some pretensions to respectability. The complexity, as well as the wild and dreadful acts of such characters, continue to fascinate us.