

# Historical Fiction to Historical Fact: Gangs of New York and the Whitewashing of History



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**“America was born  
in the streets,”**

or so proclaims the menacing publicity poster for Martin Scorsese’s recent film, *Gangs of New York*. Before the advent of professional police forces, social services, and housing codes, urban slum-dwellers led their lives in chaotic, desperate, sometimes violent circumstances. Gangs of roughs warred over territory with gangs of competing police and firefight-

ers. *Gangs of New York* celebrates this history in a bloody pageant of historical fiction set, for the most part, in the Five Points district of Manhattan during 1862-63. The film’s thesis, put simply, is that before modernity, American civil life was wild, mean, and bloody. Even during the Civil War, the great turning point in American history, the Union was hardly unified. Within that context, Irish immigrants won a place for themselves through heroic acts of violence and resistance on the streets. In our twenty-first century comfort, we (the film’s audience)

have forgotten our own past.

Scorsese’s movie joins a long list of popular historical films of the last two decades that have attempted to cash in on the public’s fascination with history by settling on controversial topics—Vietnam, the assassination of JFK, the Holocaust, and D-Day to name a few. And like the best of its ilk, the film aims for super-realism, right down to the buttons. This emphasis seems to go hand in hand with an unstated assumption about big-budget historical films: that they are historically truthful. Although they are

unregulated, and produced by large corporations for the sole purpose of making money, historical films carry a certain weight in the public consciousness. Directors boast of the accuracy of their films, and go to great lengths to make good. Scorsese filmed *Gangs* in Italy for the sake of period architecture, injected a lexicon of nineteenth-century jargon in the script, and put lavish detail into the hair, costumes, and characters. Given the script's thesis (that we have forgotten our true past and that this is it), all this attention boils down to a single point: Scorsese wants to educate the public, and he expects it to trust his credibility. Barring a massive attack on that credibility, the film will become a major source of the public's understanding of the past.

The trouble with this scenario, however, is that while *Gangs* is accurate in detail, it is distorted and mistaken in its larger characterizations and interpretation. This should not be surprising: *Gangs of New York* is a moneymaking enterprise. The public likes heroes and happy endings. Yet because the film purports to be historically accurate, the result is the creation (or perpetuation) of a new feel-good mythology about the past that replaces the old feel-good mythology of a noble, united North that Scorsese objects to. And for the most part, this new mythology has been accepted, and even praised, by those who are supposed to alert us to credibility problems: the press.

### The Film

The setting of the film, New York City on the eve of the 1863 Draft Riots, is incidental to Scorsese's larger vision of reminding Americans of their violent past. New York, among other American cities, saw gang warfare and riots throughout the nineteenth century, and the film could have chosen any period to make its point. The choice of the 1863 riots, however, allows Scorsese to create a convenient fiction by exploiting a largely unrecognized fact in popular historical mythology: Many Northern whites opposed the Civil War as much as their Southern counterparts did. This fact, portrayed powerfully in the film, allows Scorsese to create a fiction: that

the poor and working class whites who opposed the war were usually racist "natives" while Irish immigrants opposed it only when they faced a draft. The narrator is an Irish gangster, and lest we make any mistakes, Team Hibernia is the good guys. The script makes Irishmen impish, cheery, and morally righteous; it makes the "natives" who oppose them intolerant, somber, and greedy. Middle class Protestant reformers are boos.

The trouble with focusing on the Draft Riots, though, is that the fact does not sustain the fiction. The Draft Riots were race riots as much as attacks against the government, and the factions were not white Irish versus white Protestants, but white Irish men, women, and children (and some white Protestants) against blacks.<sup>1</sup> For four days and nights, these angry mobs picked many targets—police stations, newspaper offices, homes of the well-to-do—but they visited consistent and bloodthirsty violence on African American men, women, and children everywhere. "It seemed to be an understood thing throughout the city that the Negroes should be attacked wherever found," reported *The New York Times*.<sup>2</sup> Mobs terrorized, assaulted, and murdered. *The Christian Recorder* reported that "many men were killed and thrown into the rivers, a great number hung to trees and lampposts, numbers shot down; no black person could show their heads but that they were hunted like wolves."<sup>3</sup> A mob including many women and children looted and burned a black orphan asylum to the ground. The day after the riots subsided, *The New York Times* tried to quantify the carnage: "Hundreds [of blacks] have been killed in the public streets with atrocities such as we have never seen before in a civilized country ... hundreds of them have had their houses sacked and burned, and their little property all forcibly taken from them; thousands of them have fled from the city in abject terror; and nearly all of them have been thrown out of employment."<sup>4</sup> This was ethnic cleansing, on American soil.

What *Gangs* gives us instead is worse than apologetic; it's denial. The film ignores the seething racism of Irish immigrants against African Americans,

not to mention the horrific violence done to blacks during the riots. Scorsese throws a few pitiful bones—a token black member of an Irish gang, a priest bonking an Irishman on the head for shouting at a "nigger" to leave a Catholic church, and a random camera pan past a lynching. However, none of these has any meaning within the film, except maybe to stave off the critics. As one reviewer has put it, the film "got the hats and the knives right, but the main lines of the story don't make much sense."<sup>5</sup> After all, how sympathetic would the good guys be if they were even more intolerant and racist than the bad guys? How boobish would the urban reformers be if we saw them as abolitionists fighting for the rights of slaves? In the opening dialog of the film, the audience is supposed to sympathize with the Irish immigrant's right to live peacefully in America. The film groups good guys and bad guys around their acceptance or rejection of this central premise. But in refusing to acknowledge the vicious racism of Irish gangsters themselves, it denies African Americans the same dignity. It's as if to say being prejudiced against Irish people makes one evil; being prejudiced against black people is irrelevant. Without the veneer of historical righteousness, *Gangs* is just another Scorsese bloodbath among white men. It's the sheen of historical "truth" that lends nobility and sympathy to the characters.

### The Popular Press

In spite of its flaws, Scorsese's film does provide one of those "teachable moments" we history teachers crow about—a rare chance to engage students and the public in history while we have their attention. The film includes historical figures usually found only in textbooks, such as "Boss" Tweed, Horace Greeley, and P.T. Barnum. Some memorable scenes burst the bubble of Northern denial of its own history of racism and reluctance to end slavery. Despite its limited focus on male violence, the film breathes life into nineteenth century New York—the clothes, the buildings, and the politics. The cast list boasts a number of superstars—Daniel Day Lewis, Leonardo DiCaprio, Cam-

eron Diaz, and Liam Neeson. While the film might have gotten some of the story wrong, at least it's got people talking. Public interest and publicity have led to headline reviews and historical commentary on the film. They are singing our tune.

Or are they?

The response of the popular press to the movie has been mixed; the response to the historical aspects of the story has been, with a few important exceptions, troubling. Instead of digging into professional scholarship on the riots, or into primary sources such as contemporary newspapers, the popular press has largely accepted Scorsese's whitewash of the Draft Riots.

In some cases, the most disappointing reviews of Scorsese's history have come from the most respected sources of film critique. *Chicago Sun-Times* film critic Roger Ebert hailed the "revisionism" of the piece, particularly its cynical portrayal of city politics, but unwittingly amplified Scorsese's racial deception in his summary of the film: "Competing fire brigades and police forces fight in the streets, audiences throw rotten fruit at an actor playing Abraham Lincoln, blacks and Irish are chased by mobs, and Navy ships fire on the city as the poor riot against the draft."<sup>6</sup> In this brief summary, African Americans and Irish Americans share equal victimization by racist natives, and the nebulous rioters direct their attention toward a distant, cruel government.

The widely read *USA Today* complained of the film's length, but hailed its historical vision. "Historians will pick apart *Gangs* for years," wrote reviewer Mike Clark. "The reason: For all its lack of breathing room ... it realistically puts you into the Civil War North as much as *Gone With the Wind* does with the romantically idealized South."<sup>7</sup> Ironically, the comparison between *Gangs* and *Gone with the Wind* is appropriate for quite the opposite reason: it signals the changing of the guard from the old Civil War mythology to the new. The old version romanticized the Southern way of life and deemphasized the evils of slavery (if it managed to consider the non-wealthy, non-white point of view

at all). In the post-Trent Lott, politically correct America, such a version can no longer earn money at the box office. Instead a new Civil War mythology is rising to replace it, switching the Southern Lost Cause with the Righteous White Immigrant Struggle.

And the mighty *New York Times*, which reported on the riots (and city crime in general) so courageously in the 1860s and 1870s, missed the boat completely in its 2002 review of *Gangs*, and seems to have been caught unawares of the new Civil War mythology it heralds. Reviewer A. O. Scott hailed the film as "historical filmmaking without the balm of right-thinking ideology, either liberal or conservative," but failed to notice the inherently racist balm of making Irish gangsters racially tolerant and sensitive.<sup>8</sup> (Other leading information sources, *Rolling Stone*, *Time*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *Entertainment Weekly*, CNN, and *The Chicago Tribune*, avoided mentioning the actual racial history of the Draft Riots at all.<sup>9</sup>)

Not all reviews have been blind to the historical fiction of the film. Despite the lack of leadership by the *Times*, some New York publications have been savvier. David Denby of *The New Yorker* expressed concern about the absence of realistic racism in the film.<sup>10</sup> J. Hoberman of *The Village Voice* pointed out the strange deemphasis of the "four-day pogrom against the city's African Americans," and wryly called the film a "Celtic soul fest."<sup>11</sup> *The New York Post* hit the nail on the head, labeling it a "dishonest history lesson." As *Post* writer Jonathan Foreman explained, "The film turns ... nativists into the most virulent racists and Irish Catholics into brotherhood-of-man types. The narration flat-out lies that it was a generic multi-ethnic mob that took to the streets in July 1863."<sup>12</sup> Likewise, a few city newspapers and media for and by African Americans have shown more interest in the film's racial inaccuracies. *The Washington Post* criticized Scorsese for taking the film "out of moral context" by trying to make us sympathize with the lynch mob against the government trying to stop it. SeeingBlack.com editor Ester Iverem was grateful for Scorsese's explosion of the myth of Northern unity in the

Civil War, but also noted the passing and marginal interest in the racial dimensions of the riots of 1863.<sup>13</sup>

Despite these and a few other exceptions, the majority of reviews of *Gangs of New York* have followed the lead of the *Chicago Sun-Times*, *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, and other major periodicals, either hailing the historical accuracy of the film or failing to mention the history at all. Among the 105 reviews I read of the film at the online clearinghouse Rottentomatoes.com (a website that creates links to movie reviews from online magazines, websites, and newspapers), seven noted the film's racial fiction. The rest either agreed with the film's historical interpretation or didn't discuss the history at all. Eight reviews went out of their way to hail the film's historical truthfulness.<sup>14</sup> The general consensus was that the historical aspects of the film were among its greatest strengths. The new mythology of the Righteous White Immigrant stands victorious.

### History and Heroes

*Gangs* is hardly the first film about the past to create fictions to suit its own purposes. Martin Scorsese's primary interest is to make money; his product is entertainment. Likewise, the complicity of the press in the passing of fiction for fact should not be surprising—papers and magazines are themselves products of large entertainment corporations and rely on advertising from them. Promises of historical accuracy may woo more customers to the theater, but because professional historical scholarship is no longer in the hero-making business, big budget hero films may have to settle for making the knives and buttons look good and not pretend to offer rigorous interpretation. Or they may have to rethink heroism.

In that sense, sadly, historical films like *Gangs* actually resemble the history textbooks they strive to replace. As historians James Loewen, David Tyack, and others have shown, textbook companies create politically correct history that will sell. Rather than reflect the latest professional scholarship that asks us to abandon our heroes, history textbooks provide feel-good pap that simply adds

new characters to the old cast. When an excluded group objects, its members get a token hero of their own. Like the tokens of racial prejudice in *Gangs*, however, these add-ons don't jibe with the main narrative. That story has remained the same for a century.<sup>15</sup>

It does not have to be this way. Unlike textbooks, films are largely above politics—they respond directly to markets. They even help shape them. In that sense, films have the potential to be important sources of historical thinking. History textbooks can't take risks with race. Films can, and sometimes do. Why not include historical heroes with their flaws? There are many people in American history who engaged in heroic acts, or who expressed heroic thoughts, despite their own personal limitations and flaws. George Washington and Thomas Jefferson owned slaves. Franklin Delano Roosevelt hid his polio from the nation. The public is willing to have imperfect heroes—even Superman has his kryptonite. Why not find heroes among the Irish police officers who sheltered African American families from the savage storm, or the Irish soldiers who put down the mobs, or the Irish archbishop who struggled both to restrain and protect his flock, or African Americans themselves, who bravely defended their lives and homes?

The lesson from the whitewash of *Gangs of New York* should not be that Irish Americans were “bad,” or “worse” than native Protestant ones. That's a foolish simplification, a stereotype, and not the business of historians. Rather, the problem with *Gangs* is that it wants us to think that Irish gangsters were “good” by ignoring their racism while it wants to make us think others are “bad” because they are racist. In so doing, it marginalizes African American history and covers up an event that we must never forget. A 100-million-dollar film that boasts an accurate depiction of history should be able to give us sympathetic characters without cheap shortcuts.

As it is, the end of *Gangs* offers an unintentional, brutally ironic observation: After burying the man he has just bludgeoned and stabbed to death, the protagonist and his love interest stare at Manhattan from across the East River. Slowly the skyline grows and changes

into one familiar to us today. In a dramatic voice-over, the narrator waxes, “For the rest of time, it would be as if no one ever knew we were here.”

Had the two characters been African American, this would have been the truest line of the film. ❧

## Notes

1. The brave conduct of Irish policemen and soldiers who put down the riots speaks to the great complexity of the relationship between Irish Americans, African Americans, and the Civil War. Those interested should also consult Archbishop Hughes's speech to the rioters on the first day of peace, reported in *The New York Times* on Saturday, July 18, 1863.
2. Tuesday, July 14, 1863, 1.
3. As cited in Kenneth T. Jackson and David S. Dunbar, eds., *Empire City: New York Through the Centuries* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 266.
4. Friday, July 17, 1863, 4.
5. David Denby, “For the Love of Fighting,” *The New Yorker* (December 23 and 30, 2002), 168.
6. *Chicago Sun-Times* (December 20, 2002).
7. Mike Clark, “*Gangs* Makes for Arrestingly Ambitious Movie Going,” *USA Today* (December 19, 2002).
8. *The New York Times* (December 20, 2002).
9. Peter Travers, “*Gangs of New York*,” *Rolling Stone* (January 2, 2003); Richard Corliss, “Have a Very Leo Noel,” *Time* (December 23, 2002); Kenneth Turan, “Murder, Revenge, Rage... and Apathy,” *Los Angeles Times* (December 20, 2002); Lisa Schwartzbaum, “*Gangs of New York*,” *Entertainment Weekly* (December 18, 2002); Paul Clinton, “Review: Epic *Gangs* Oscar-Worthy Effort,” CNN Online (December 19, 2002); Mike Wilmington, “Movie Review: *Gangs of New York*,” *Chicago Tribune* (no date given).
10. “For the Love of Fighting,” *The New Yorker* (December 23 and 30, 2002), 168.
11. J. Hoberman, “Vice City,” *The Village Voice*, [www.villagevoice.com/issues/0251/hoberman.php](http://www.villagevoice.com/issues/0251/hoberman.php).
12. Jonathan Foreman, “*Gangs* Not All Here,” *New York Post* (December 20, 2002).
13. [www.seeingblack.com/x122302/antwone\\_fisher.shtml](http://www.seeingblack.com/x122302/antwone_fisher.shtml). Her review also appeared on [africana.com](http://africana.com).
14. Other reviews critical of the whitewash include Gary Thompson, “*Gangs* Tells of a City's Violent History,” *Philadelphia Daily News* (December 20, 2002); Tor Thorsen, “*Gangs of New York*,” [reel.com](http://reel.com).
15. David B. Tyack, “Monuments Between Covers: the Politics of Textbooks,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 42, 6 (March 1999), 922-932; James W. Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995).

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