

MANHATTAN MAYHEM

Martin Scorsese's realistic portrayal of pre-Civil War strife—Gangs of New York—re-creates the brutal street warfare waged between immigrant groups

BY FERGUS M. BORDEWICH

WHEN HE WAS GROWING UP on Lower Manhattan's Elizabeth Street in the 1950s, Martin Scorsese noticed tantalizing vestiges of a New York City that simply didn't fit into the Little Italy neighborhood he otherwise knew so well. There were the tombstones dating to the 1810s in the graveyard at nearby St. Patrick's church, cobblestone pavements that hinted at horse-drawn traffic, and the "very tiny, very ancient" basements he discovered beneath late-19th-century tenements. "I gradually realized that the Italian-Americans weren't the first ones there, that other people had preceded us," says Scorsese. "This fascinated me. I kept wondering, how did New York look? What were the people like? How did they walk, eat, work, dress?"

That childhood obsession with a vanished past propels the *Gangs of New York*, Scorsese's epic evocation of the city's brutal, colorful underworld in the first half of the 19th century. But the director says the movie, which opens nationwide this month, had its genesis in a "chance encounter" more than 30 years ago. In January 1970, Scorsese, by then an aspiring filmmaker, stumbled across a volume in a friend's library that changed everything he thought he knew about his old neighborhood. Suddenly, the nameless ghosts that had flitted through those mysterious basements sprang to life. The book was *The Gangs of New York*, an account of the city's 19th-century underworld published in 1927 by journalist Herbert Asbury. "It was a revelation," Scorsese says. "There were so many gangs!"

In Asbury's vivid chronicle, Scorsese discovered a deadly subculture of hoodlums with names like the Bowery Boys, the Plug Uglies, the Short Tails and the Dead Rabbits, the latter so called, it was said, because they carried a dead rabbit on a pike as their battle standard. In these

pages, he was introduced to legions of once-notorious gangsters, among them Bill "the Butcher" Poole, Red Rocks Farrell, Slobbery Jim, Sow Madden, Piggy Noles, Suds Merrick, Cowlegged Sam McCarthy, Eat 'Em Up Jack McManus. Not all the thugs, he discovered, were male. Hell-Cat Maggie, legend has it, filed her front teeth to points and wore artificial brass fingernails, the better to lacerate her adversaries.

Behind much of the violence lay a clash that involved, on the one hand, a population of largely protestant Americans, some of them with 18th-century English and Dutch roots in the New World, some of them more recent arrivals. This group collectively came to be known as nativists, for their perceived entitlement to native American soil. They squared off against Catholic Irish immigrants who arrived in the millions during the 19th century. Nativists "looked at the Irish coming off the boats," Scorsese adds, "and said, 'What are you doing here?' It was chaos, tribal chaos."

In Asbury's book, Scorsese recognized something larger than a portrait of the city's bygone lowlife. As the descendant of immigrants himself (his grandparents arrived from Sicily at the turn of the century), he saw in the bloody street fighting of the mid-19th century a battle for nothing less than democracy itself. "The country was up for grabs, and New York was a powder keg," says Scorsese. "This was the America not of the West with its wide open spaces, but of claustrophobia, where everyone was crushed together. If democracy didn't happen in New York, it wasn't going to happen anywhere."

As a fledgling director, Scorsese could only dream of taking Asbury's characters to the screen. But two years

after his hard-edged portrayal of his old neighborhood in 1977's *Mean Streets*, which brought him critical acclaim, Scorsese acquired the screen rights to the book. It would take him three decades to bring his vision to fruition.

Beginning with a bloody gang war in 1846, *Gangs of New York* culminates amid the Götterdämmerung of the 1863 draft riots, in which perhaps as many as 70,000 men and women, aroused by the introduction of mandatory conscription during the third year of the Civil War, rampaged through the streets of New York, setting houses afire, battling police and lynching African-Americans. Federal troops had to be brought in to quell the disturbance.

As early as 1800, immigrants, nativists and others had confronted one another in the streets of New York. Here, competing groups vied for living space and economic survival in a cramped district near the tip of Manhattan. Though Scorsese's film does not claim to transcribe events of long ago with documentary precision, its fictional plots of vengeance, romance and political intrigue evoke an all-but-forgotten urban past, as if Scorsese had pried loose one of Lower Manhattan's ancient cobblestones, and the teeming world of the 1850s had risen emphatically from the depths.

RE-CREATING THIS lost world was a daunting exercise. Very little of 1860s New York City—in particular, two- and three-story wood frame buildings, which began disappearing in the 1830s—survives today. Ultimately, Scorsese's solution was, in effect, to transport 19th-century New York to the vast Cinecitta Studio in Rome, where most of the film was shot. Scores of buildings (laid end to end, the structures would extend for more than a mile) were constructed to replicate entire sections of the city. Production designer Dante Ferretti's army of carpenters built a five-block area of Lower Manhattan, including the notorious Five Points slum (so named because of the angular convergence of streets there, a few hundred feet east of today's criminal courts and a short walk from Ground Zero) and a section of the East River waterfront replete with two full-scale ships. They also built a mansion, replicas of Tammany Hall, a church, a saloon, a Chinese theater and a gambling casino.

Says the amiable Ferretti, a protégé of the late legend Federico Fellini: "When I make a movie, my goal is not just to re-create the past but to imagine it as if I were a person living in that world. Fellini always told me, 'Don't just copy. Don't be afraid to use your imagination.'"

Costume designer Sandy Powell faced the challenge of dressing actors who, for the most part, portray an impoverished and largely unwashed underclass who were often too poor to own more than a single suit of clothes. "They wore what they had, and what they had was often filthy," says Powell. "The clothing was often found, or stolen."

Equal concern for authenticity was expended on the speech of characters, whose loyalties were often revealed by their accents. In search of lost speech patterns, dialect coach Tim Monich studied old poems, ballads and news-

paper articles (which sometimes reproduced spoken dialect as a form of humor). He also consulted *The Rogue's Lexicon*, a book of underworld idioms compiled in 1859 by a former New York City police chief who was fascinated by the inner life of the gangs. A key piece of evidence was a rare 1892 wax recording of Walt Whitman reciting four lines from *Leaves of Grass*. On it, the poet pronounces "world" as "woild," and the "a" of "an" nasal and flat, like "ayan." Monich concluded that native 19th-century New Yorkers sounded something like Brooklyn cabbies of the mid-20th. Actors were allowed to employ 19th-century slang (for example, "chump," meaning dolt, was already in use). They were told, however, to replace "dope fiend" with "hop fiend" and to substitute "lime juicers" for "limeys" when insulting Americans of British heritage. When Liam Neeson, who plays a gang leader, mocked his rivals as "Nancy Boys," or sissies, a term still used in Ballymena, Neeson's Northern Ireland hometown, Monich informed him that New York hooligans would have called them "Miss Nancies."

MOST OF THE FILM'S action takes place around the seething Five Points slum, then a paramount symbol of anarchy, violence and urban hopelessness. About 1830, the *New York Mirror* described the area as a "loathsome den of murderers, thieves, abandoned women, ruined children, filth, drunkenness, and broils [brawls]." Around the same time, George Catlin, the artist best known for his portraits of Indians on the Great Plains (see "George Catlin's Obsession," p. 70), painted the Five Points district, depicting a riotous scene of brawling drunks, leering prostitutes and intermingled races. To most Americans, the very name itself suggested unspeakable wickedness and sin. Individual tenements acquired monikers like the Gates of Hell or Brickbat Mansion. The most notorious hellhole of all, and a key setting for the film, was a cavernous abandoned brewery turned tenement. Here, a population of several hundred, the poorest of Irish immigrants and African-Americans, lived under unspeakable conditions. Prostitutes plied their trade openly in a single vast chamber, known as the Den of Thieves. Beneath the basement's earthen floor, the dead, too destitute even for a proper burial, were sometimes interred. Everywhere in the neighborhood, lanes ran thick with a soup of rotting garbage and human waste; pigs and other animals foraged in the fetid byways. "Saturate your handkerchief with camphor, so that you can endure the horrid stench," visitors were advised by one 19th-century temperance worker.

For Charles Dickens, who visited New York in 1842, the Five Points was a real-life hell, where human beings with "coarse and bloated faces" were barely distinguishable from animals. "From every corner as you glance about you in these dark retreats," he wrote in *American Notes*, "some figure crawls half-awakened, as if the judgement-hour were near at hand, and every obscure grave were giving up its dead. Where dogs would howl to lie, women, and men, and boys slink off to sleep, forcing the dislodged rats

to move away in quest of better lodgings.”

Until the early 1800s, New York City had been a comparatively staid and conservative town, whose northern limits barely extended beyond modern Wall Street. (As late as the 1810s, cows grazed where New York’s City Hall now stands.) But by the 1830s, the city had expanded north to Greenwich Village. As wave after wave of mostly Irish immigrants poured into the area, two- and three-story dormered town houses, until then the residences of merchants and middle-class craftsmen, were converted into tenements. There was no public sewage system, little police protection and no restriction on the number of people who could be packed into a single dwelling. In only 25 years, from 1830 to 1855, the population of the Five Points area nearly doubled. By then, first-generation immigrants accounted for 72 percent of the area’s population. One outcome of this new, cruelly congested kind of city was the first American slum. Another was the street gang.

In *Low Life*, a 1991 study of New York’s many overlapping 19th-century underworlds, journalist Luc Sante reports, “The basic unit of social life among young males in New York in the nineteenth century was (as it perhaps is still and ever more shall be) the gang.” For “the Manhattan of the immigrants,” he says, the gang served as “an important marker, a sort of social stake driven in,” which allowed various ethnic groups to control a few blocks of a city in which they wielded very little real power. “They engaged in violence,” writes Sante, “but violence was a normal part of life in their always-contested environment; turf war was a condition of the neighborhood.”

Gangs specialized in everything from waterborne piracy to picking pockets, burglary and election fraud. Even more commonly they tried their hands at indiscriminate mayhem. One gang, for example, worked the Hudson River in rowboats, robbing ships at anchor. They were commanded by a fearsome Valkyrie known as Sadie the Goat, who at the height of a barroom brawl had an ear bitten off by the equally ferocious Gallus Mag, who earned her stripes as a bouncer at the Hole-in-the-Wall, a notorious bar. Thereafter, Sadie is said to have worn the missing anatomical feature in a locket around her neck. Hard-drinking sailors were especially popular targets. “Crimps” (meaning kidnapers) operated boardinghouses where seamen were regularly drugged, robbed and often murdered; in the 1860s, it was estimated that 15,000 sailors were mugged each year on Cherry Street alone. It was said that no well-dressed man, and certainly no woman, could venture safely off Broadway, even in the daylight. “If the gangsters could not lure a prospective victim into a dive, they followed him until he passed beneath an appointed window, from which a woman dumped a bucket of ashes on his head,” wrote Asbury. “As he gasped and choked, the thugs rushed him into a cellar, where they killed him and stripped the clothing from his back, afterward casting his naked body upon the sidewalk.”

For all their ferocity, some gangs had a well-developed

sense of public relations. After a prolonged and bloody outbreak of fighting in 1857, the *New York Times* printed a notice that read: “We are requested by the Dead Rabbits to state that the Dead Rabbit club members are not thieves, that they did not participate in the riot with the Bowery Boys, and that the fight in Mulberry street was between the Roach Guards of Mulberry street and the Atlantic Guards of the Bowery. The Dead Rabbits are sensitive on points of honor, we are assured, and wouldn’t allow a thief to live on their beat, much less be a member of their club.”

As interpreted by actor Daniel Day-Lewis, Bill “the Butcher” Cutting, a violent character Scorsese based on Bill “the Butcher” Poole, a gang leader with nativist sympathies, remains a fundamentally ethical man. Cutting possesses a sense of dignity and of history. In the script, Cutting’s father had been killed fighting the English in the War of 1812. The son fancies his hatred of foreigners to be a kind of patriotism and his combat with immigrants a defense of the values for which he believes his father died. “Judged by today’s standards, he would be a psychotic,” says Day-Lewis. “But I don’t think that he was a rare species.” Day-Lewis grew up in south London, where he remembers rival mobs of soccer supporters scheming to murder one another. “Cutting had learned how to live in the streets of his place and time,” he adds. “He represents a very common experience, of a native-born man whose parents somehow managed to claw their way up to a position of self-respect. He has got a code of ethics, and he sees himself as continuing the good work that his father began. But people like him are under siege. Every time a boat unloads another load of ‘savages,’ if you are Bill Cutting, you feel you’re going to lose another rung in the pecking order.”

In real life, Bill Poole led a gang based around Christopher Street, in the heart of present-day Greenwich Village. Standing over six feet tall and weighing more than 200 pounds, Poole was, in Asbury’s words, a “champion brawler and eye-gouger.” One of his sidelines was providing muscle to nativist-leaning candidates during local elections. Poole developed a rivalry with an Irish-American prizefighter and gambler, John Morrissey, who would go on, through the patronage of the corrupt Democratic Party machine known as Tammany Hall, to become a state legislator and a Democratic member of the United States Congress. Morrissey, who was savagely beaten by Poole when the boxer and his henchmen attacked a nativist clubhouse, vowed revenge.

The feud continued until 1855, when Poole met his end in a Broadway barroom. One of Morrissey’s hoodlums, Lew Baker, shot him with a long-barreled Colt. Though fatally wounded, Poole managed to seize a carving knife and lurch for his assailant before he died. Baker fled on a ship bound for the Canary Islands, but was intercepted by a private yacht, dispatched by one of Poole’s wealthy cronies, and carried back to New York. Tried for murder along with Morrissey, he ultimately

went free after three separate juries failed to reach a consensus, despite several eyewitnesses to Poole's assassination—proof of how firmly the city was in the grip of Tammany's minions. Melodramas celebrating Poole as a local folk hero soon appeared. The productions invariably ended with an actor draped in an American flag, gasping out Poole's alleged farewell to his cronies: "Goodbye, boys, I die a true American!"

Although Scorsese's film concludes with the 1863 draft riots, which marked an end to one phase of violent conflict in the city's streets, gangs continued to flourish long after the Civil War. The gangsters of the later 1800s reflected America's changed society. George Leonidas Leslie, believed to have masterminded 80 percent of the bank robberies committed in New York from 1874 to 1885, was a college graduate, while 250-pound Marm Mandelbaum lived comfortably in her Lower East Side apartment, from which she ran a school for pickpockets.

In comparison with the tribal mayhem of the mid-19th century, the Italian-American mafia, as it rose to power in the 1890s, was positively corporate in its structure, built on complex hierarchies and entrepreneurial sophistication. But mafiosi were not the only outlaws demonstrating a head for business. When a bruiser named Piker Ryan, a member of the fearsome Whyos gang, was arrested by the police in the late 1800s, he was found to be carrying a presumably market-tested price list of crimes-for-hire, including:

Punching . . . \$2

Both eyes blacked . . . \$4

Ear chewed off . . . \$15

Stab . . . \$25

Doing the big job . . . \$100 and up

By the 1890s, Manhattan's meanest streets had been so tamed that middle-class tourists were taking midnight tours of Bowery dives. The old underworld had become, in part, a caricature of itself. Some Bowery haunts remade themselves into tourist traps, morphing into a kind of low-life Disneyland, designed to titillate with staged scenes of opium smoking and tableaux depicting "white slavery" in the "depths" of Chinatown. One celebrated barkeep, Steve Brodie, paid his regulars to impersonate the lowlifes whom "slummers" yearned to glimpse. For a time, Brodie actually played himself onstage as the quintessential Bowery denizen. It was one more reflection of the entertainment industry's love affair with New York's underworld, a fascination that would continue through the hard-boiled gangster films of Jimmy Cagney to the blood-soaked realism of Scorsese's latest endeavor.

Although nearly every trace of the world that Scorsese has re-created has long since been obliterated, there are a few exceptions. At 42 Bowery, an address claimed by some to be the former clubhouse of the Bowery Boys, a Chinese restaurant now stands. Several blocks of Bayard Street, where the Bowery Boys and the Dead Rabbits brawled in

the 1850s, remain much the same. In Five Points, which includes a section of modern Chinatown, small children clamber over jungle gyms in a public park. If the ghosts of the thugs and mayhem artists, the murderers and pickpockets, the embattled nativists and desperate immigrants still linger, their murmurings are lost among the voices of today's New Yorkers, chattering to each other in half a dozen dialects of Chinese, in Haitian French, Spanish, and even the slurry tones of the durable old New Yorkese that Bill the Butcher would have recognized.

Writer Fergus M. Bordewich's great-grandfather was, as a young man, a gang member on the streets of 19th-century New York.