

www.chicagotribune.com/features/books/ct-prj-1124-pinkertons-great-detective-beau-riffen-20131121,0,7209659.story

chicagotribune.com

PRINTERS ROW PREVIEW

Review: 'Pinkerton's Great Detective' by Beau Riffenburgh

Riffenburgh's page-turner chronicles James McParland's life, but passes no judgment

By Bill Savage

November 21, 2013

Impartiality can be a virtue or a vice.

advertisement

To withhold judgment about a person or event until all available evidence is in, and to be as certain as possible regarding the reliability and conflicts of interest which witnesses or participants can bring to any narrative, is an admirable form of impartiality.

This piece first ran in Printers Row Journal, delivered to Printers Row members with the Sunday Chicago Tribune and by digital edition via email. [Click here to learn about joining Printers Row.](#)

To use "impartiality" to refrain from making connections and judgments about historical persons and events can also be a form of cowardice, an avoidance of the hard but necessary choices we must make if we are to understand the past, and the relationship of the past to the present.

Beau Riffenburgh's new book, "Pinkerton's Great Detective: The Amazing Life and Times of James McParland," manages to be both admirable and cowardly.

The book is a suspenseful page-turner pivoting around the enigmatic life of Pinkerton detective James McParland, later McParland. Riffenburgh has conducted meticulous research from many conflicting sources: internal reports to and from McParland's employer, testimony in many courtrooms, newspapers, books and archives.

Riffenburgh writes smooth and compelling prose, and McParland is a fascinating character. Any fan of American crime stories or Westerns will revel in Riffenburgh's vivid narratives of crimes McParland had a part in investigating, including the bank robberies of the Hole-in-the-Wall gang. Riffenburgh paints deft and deep

portraits of many supporting characters, from famed attorney Clarence Darrow to the more obscure Charles Siringo, author of the first cowboy autobiography.

Yet the book is essentially troubling.

To put it impartially, Riffenburgh tells the story of the man who went deep under cover at great personal risk to expose industrial terrorists from the anthracite coal fields of Pennsylvania, becoming perhaps the most famous detective in the annals of American crime and punishment.

He also tells the story of the man who infiltrated and broke unions in the service of industrialists seeking monopolies on the necessities of life, a man who may have provoked impoverished immigrants to murderous crimes they would not have committed were it not for his provocations.

Yet some facts are settled: McParland was an Irish immigrant to the United States in the 1860s, who knocked around at various jobs until, after Chicago's Great Fire of 1871 put his saloon out of business, he found work as a detective for the Pinkerton Agency.

Today, private detectives have a romantic and individualistic glamour: Sam Spade or Philip Marlowe, self-employed American knights-errant working selflessly for their clients in morally ambiguous noir chess games of crime and punishment.

But the Pinkertons were no romantics: Not long after the Civil War, they were the largest private law enforcement agency in the United States, working for the Federal government (which did not have much of a police force, even for presidential security) and industry, as well as private clients. The Pinkerton Agency, despite its economic ups and downs, was so successful that "Pinkerton" became a synonym for "detective," like "Xerox" for "photocopy."

For decades, the Pinkertons made most of their reputation, and much of their money, working to break unions. The parts of Riffenburgh's book which are most frustrating and illuminating from a contemporary perspective have to do with labor and connections between contemporary politics and the past.

On the one hand, McParland was an agent of monopoly capitalism: He first made his name in the employ of Franklin Gowen, president of the Reading Railroad and many coal mines, who wanted to break the Pennsylvania coal miners by destroying their nascent union. This operation involved dealing with two other groups of people whom the police and mine management could not get at: the Ancient Order of Hibernians, an Irish fraternal society, and the Molly Maguires, a secret society happy to use violence to secure its goals and avenge wrongs against it.

McParland, as Upton Sinclair did from the opposite political angle decades later in the Chicago stockyards, infiltrated the coal miners using the simple ruse of joining them in their work.

Riffenburgh relates how the detective succeeded at his job and, at the same time, served as a Cassandra. It's a riveting story. He rightly predicted that if Gowen broke the union, that the forces of optimism and moderation that kept the more violent men in check would disappear, with murder and mayhem to follow. And so it came to pass, as Molly Maguires killed mine operators, policemen and other foes of their cause.

After years of undercover work among these men, McParland took the stand and testified. McParland's foes argued that he had provoked men into crimes and then set them up to be arrested. The juries disagreed.

Twenty men were hanged based in no small part on his word, and Riffenburgh never takes a side in the argument about McParland's culpability. He presents both arguments without making any judgment, as so many contemporary media outlets just recount each party's talking points to avoid being seen as "partisan."

Perhaps such ambivalence is inevitable in a biography: Riffenburgh's attempt to understand McParland as an individual skews the perspective of the book, one that might have connected the deprivations of coal miners in the years after the Civil War to workers in the post-industrial America of the 21st century.

Today, the American union movement is almost moribund, as deindustrialization has left few routes up the ladder for uneducated workers apart from minimum-wage fast food jobs. Politicians and much of the media blame public sector unions for the failures of politicians to follow the law on pension funding.

Meanwhile, we forget that men once put their lives on the line for — and died on the gallows for — an unthinkable, un-American idea: the eight-hour-day.

And there is no doubt about on which side of that conflict the Pinkertons and their greatest detective stood: on the side of owners against workers.

But Riffenburgh maintains his admirable impartiality unto the end. He writes in his conclusion that:

If one begins with a belief that James McParland was a noble hero on the side of the angels, a man who fought for right, one can find "facts" to support the notion. Similarly, if one begins with a belief that McParland was a villain lacking a conscience, and that time and again his testimony was a pack of lies, one can find "evidence" to support that, too.

However, no one can ever truly know what was in the mind or heart of a man a century ago — particularly one as complex and mysterious as McParland.

The scare quotes here matter: It is as though Riffenburgh doesn't trust his own sources, and he probably should not because they would betray him the way McParland betrayed so many of his confidants. This gesture toward historical prejudice is nonsense. McParland, unlike other historical figures from this period, is not particularly well known. Few of Riffenburgh's contemporary readers would open this book with prejudices regarding "Pinkerton's Great Detective" beyond those induced by his own subtitle. Few readers would come to this book judgment already in hand. Readers would, and should, expect some judgment from the author.

The job of the writer of history is, in the end, to make judgments about "facts" and "evidence," even when such judgments are not easily made.

Throughout this engaging and enraging book, Riffenburgh tells vivid stories and presents wildly varying evidence, mostly from sources close to McParland. But he refuses in the end either to defend the man as an impartial agent of American justice or to condemn him as an agent provocateur.

McParland may indeed have been some mixture of the two, but Riffenburgh's readers will have to judge that for themselves.

Bill Savage is distinguished senior lecturer at Northwestern University.

"Pinkerton's Great Detective"

By Beau Riffenburgh, Viking, 384 pages, \$32.95

Copyright © 2013 Chicago Tribune Company, LLC