

Killing the Poormaster: A Saga of Poverty, Corruption, and Murder in the Great Depression
Holly Metz

Lawrence Hill Books, Chicago, 2012. 308 pp. \$26.95 cloth.

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.14713/njs.v1i1.7>

In *Killing the Poormaster: A Saga of Poverty, Corruption, and Murder in the Great Depression*, Holly Metz has written a book that both illuminates the past and is relevant to the present. The volume, published by Lawrence Hill Books and supported by a grant from the New Jersey Historical Commission, examines the tragic story of Joe Scutellaro, the American born son of Italian immigrants, and his fateful encounter with Hoboken's relief system during the Great Depression. This is a solid historical work that sheds light on Depression Era politics, the role of party bosses, criminal justice, and social welfare issues in 1930s New Jersey. At the same time, it is an engaging story, with compelling characters that draw the reader in. Frankly, once you pick it up it is hard to put down.

The volume begins on the relief line in Poormaster Harry Barck's office in downtown Hoboken, New Jersey on February 25th, 1938. Barck, whose title sounds Dickensian, was part of Hoboken's political machine and a critical gatekeeper for the thousands of city residents seeking relief. Barck's charge was to determine which of his supplicants were in fact "deserving poor." These lucky few he provided with modest vouchers that could be used to purchase food. Barck's job was far from easy, yet he seems to have relished the power it gave him and he performed his unenviable task in a manner that was both cruel and miserly. The morning had been a tough one for both Barck and his supplicants. He refused a young, indigent Italian American woman, Lena Fusco, aid. She had argued with him, spit in his faced, and cursed him in Italian. His next visitor was Joe Scutallero, an unemployed carpenter and the main breadwinner for a family of four. The meeting would end with Barck's death.

With the stage set, Metz goes on to introduce Hoboken's political boss, Mayor Bernard McFeely, an individual somewhat less well known than nearby Jersey City's Frank Hague, but every bit as commanding. We are also introduced to the on again off again nature of relief in New Jersey during the Depression, where public assistance might come from Federal work projects, or from state and municipal sources. As politicians debated whether relief helped the deserving poor or encouraged shiftless individuals to take advantage of the dole, families starved. The book paints a grim picture of relief efforts in Hoboken. It is a sad story with resonance today in the waning days of our own Great Recession.

Metz also provides an excellent contextual history of Hoboken, which was geographically and socially divided between an industrial downtown, home to the docks, and large numbers of Italian American immigrants; and an uptown, home to the patrician Stevens family, as well as earlier generations of immigrants, especially German Americans. It was also a city where the children of Irish immigrants had seized the reigns of political power under Mayor Bernard McFeely. Joe Scutellaro's father Frank, an immigrant from Naples, had benefited from his association with McFeeley and Jersey City's Democratic political machine, and Joe, more than many children of immigrants had lived a life relatively free from privation. However, just before the Depression began Frank Scutallero had thrown his lot in with a group of aspiring Italian American political leaders. As a result he lost the patronage work that previously had come his way. By 1938 Frank's son Joe had gone months without steady work. Joe repeatedly petitioned Poormaster Barck for aid, with predictable results. On February 25, 1938 when Joe again visited Barck, the Poormaster suggested Joe's wife Anna Scutallero prostitute herself to support the family. A scuffle ensued and Barck, who towered over the diminutive Joe Scutallero, fell forward, impaling himself on a paper spike.

Through the rest of the book we follow Joe's case as it is fought out in the criminal justice system and in the court of public opinion. Scutellaro's defense is one of the most interesting themes of the book. Facing the death penalty, his family retained the services of Sam Leibovitz, a defense attorney with an impeccable record, famous for defending the Scottsboro Boys, who had been falsely accused of raping two southern white women. Hoboken's broken judicial system proved challenging even to the skills of Liebovitz. Liebovitz built his case as much around the conditions Scutellaro faced in Hoboken as the death of the poormaster.

Metz interweaves Scutallero's story with that of Herman Matson, another Hoboken resident living on relief. Herman, who had worked on and off for the WPA since 1936, became an important advocate for Scutellaro. Matson was Chairman of the Hoboken Chapter of the Workers Defense League of New Jersey, and distributed leaflets about the inadequacy of Hoboken's relief efforts. He also spoke publicly against the McFeely administration and as a result was brutally beaten, tossed out of work, and prosecuted on a variety of trumped up charges. As a side note, Matson was supported in his efforts by Morris Milgram, later to become famous for his advocacy of integrated housing developments.

As Metz walks readers through the trial it is hard not to root for Joe Scutallero. Her writing brings the courtroom to life. The cases presented by the defense and prosecution are presented in detail. Metz wraps up the book by tracing the post-trial careers of the participants. As a reader I had hoped to have it all wrapped up with a clear-cut and decidedly happy ending. The reality was much more complicated.

Holly Metz's *Killing the Poormaster* is a book worth reading. Recently, there has been a spike in historical interest in the period between the World Wars. This is particularly true in New Jersey where new attention has focused on many of the sordid aspects of this period from

gangsters,¹ to the Klan and Bund,² to prohibition and political bosses.³ The critically acclaimed TV show *Boardwalk Empire* reflects a popular fictionalized view of this period. Metz's book contribution is both a strong scholarly contribution and a great read. It is a major contribution to the literature on life in New Jersey between the World Wars.

Dr. Richard Veit

Monmouth University

¹ Marc Mappen, *Prohibition Gangsters: The Rise and Fall of a Bad Generation* (New Brunswick, N.J. 2013).

² Warren Grover, *Nazis in Newark* (Piscataway, N.J. 2003).

³ Steven Hart, *American Dictators: Frank Hague, Nucky Johnson and the Perfection of the Urban Political Machine*. (New Brunswick, N.J. 2013).