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Book Review: 'Machine Made,' by Terry Golway

Many of the driving figures of the New Deal and later reforms came from the Irish-American Tammany machine of New York.

By Edward Kosner

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With his exquisite dark suits, faultless manners and amber-tinted glasses, Carmine De Sapio was a figure of sinister glamour in post-World War II New York. He was the last real boss of Tammany Hall, the city's Democratic machine, which had been steered in the first years of the Republic by the wily Aaron Burr and revved up in the mid-1800s by the avaricious William M. "Boss" Tweed. During his 13-year reign, De Sapio made and broke governors and mayors, palled around with godfather Frank Costello, once memorably left \$11,200 in cash in a taxi, and ultimately wound up in prison.

By the time of De Sapio's ignominious fall in 1961, Tammany was indeed a paper tiger—a simulacrum of what had been the most enduring and, for long stretches, the most powerful political organization in American history. It was also the most corrupt. George Washington Plunkitt, a Tammany stalwart in the later 19th century, conceived the notion of "honest graft"—opportunities monetized by political connections—and made the most of it. Caricaturist Thomas Nast drew Boss Tweed, Plunkitt's less fastidious swagman, as a paragon of self-enrichment.

Tammany's tale has been told many times but likely never more sympathetically than in Terry Golway's "Machine Made: Tammany Hall and the Creation of Modern American Politics." Burr was a Protestant, as was Tweed (a Scots Presbyterian), and "Carmine," as everyone called him, was Italian. But the soul of Tammany was Irish-Catholic, and it is Mr. Golway's insistent thesis that the machine that marshaled first the desperate refugees from the Irish potato famine of the 1840s and then their children and grandchildren was the primary force that shaped modern American liberalism.

His book is less a chronicle of a gaudy political institution than a painstaking account of how the Irish in America triumphed over the "transatlantic Anglo-Protestant" culture. Its leaders were the American equivalents of the people who had subjugated the Irish in their homeland and allowed them to starve when *Phytophthora infestans* began rotting the potato crop in 1845. Tammany's ascendance, he writes, "was Irish America's revolution . . . a revolution rooted in a transatlantic Irish narrative of hunger, powerlessness and grievance; a revolution that created a more pluralistic, activist political culture."



MACHINE MADE

By Terry Golway
(Liveright, 367 pages, \$27.95)

The villains of Mr. Golway's account are not Tweed and his cronies, debonair Mayor "Gentleman" Jimmy Walker or other Tammany thieves, but the purse-lipped Protestant preachers, high-born reformers and nativist "Know-Nothing" bigots who sought to keep the Irish hordes from contaminating their America with "rum, Romanism, and rebellion." It can be disconcerting to learn that icons like Walt Whitman and cartoonist Thomas Nast egged on the mob. The people's poet inveighed against "the filthy Irish rabble," and Nast's celebrated lampoons of Boss Tweed often included villainous Catholic priests.

As a consequence, there aren't many rollicking Tammany anecdotes in Mr. Golway's sober pages. One of the few concerns Murray Hall, a boozy Tammany factotum for 40 years who expired near the turn of the 20th century—and turned out to be a woman in lifelong drag. "She's dead, the poor fellow," lamented Hall's closest crony.

Tammany—the name was appropriated from an Indian chief—was still Protestant-run when the Irish began crowding the slums of lower Manhattan. But the machine's leaders, sensing the demographic wave soon to swamp the city, began catering to the immigrants—providing food for the hungry, rent for the destitute, jobs for the men and help in becoming citizens for all. Unlike the city's Protestant establishment, Tammany didn't care whether the newcomers were what one preacher called "a rum-soaked and libidinous lot." "If we go down in the gutter," said one of Tammany's more crooked bosses, "it is because there are men in the gutter." Before long, the grateful Irish were marching to the polls—and the machine grew omnipotent.

The hero of "Machine Made" is "Silent Charlie" Murphy, son of a famine exile. He had been the Tammany boss for nearly a decade when, on March 25, 1911, fire engulfed the Triangle Shirtwaist factory in Greenwich Village, killing 146 workers, mostly young Jewish and Italian immigrant women. Shepherded by Murphy, two young Democratic state legislators, Robert F. Wagner and Alfred E. Smith, headed an investigation that led to sweeping reform laws that prefigured the New Deal.

Smith went on to be a four-time governor of New York and the first Roman Catholic candidate for president. Wagner became a U.S. senator from New York, the architect of the Wagner labor act and the manager of much New Deal legislation. Another Tammany man, Herbert Lehman, governor and later senator, joined them in their efforts. Franklin Roosevelt, as governor and as president, grew increasingly comfortable with Tammany in its unlikely new incarnation as a progressive force; Ed Flynn, a former Democratic boss of the Bronx, was an FDR insider.

The first years of the New Deal were Tammany's peak of influence. Then the tide turned. Murphy's successors reverted to greedy type. Fiorello La Guardia, an ebullient Italian Protestant-Jewish reformer, stormed City Hall in 1933 and began to freeze out Tammany. The Irish and other minorities prospered and moved to the suburbs.

Tammany still had the clout to install Sen. Wagner's dough-faced son, Robert F. Wagner Jr., as mayor in 1954. But Wagner was no Tammany tool. In 1961, as De Sapio lost his political base to a no-name reformer, Wagner won a third term by running against the very bosses who had put him in office in the first place. Tammany was finished, although the Democratic machine clung to power in Brooklyn, Queens and the Bronx.

Mr. Golway gives Tammany too much credit as the cradle of American liberalism and turns too fond an eye on the machine's corruption and rapacity. But his revisionist take is a useful reminder of the unmatched ingenuity of American politics.

Mr. Kosner, the former editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News, is the author of a memoir, "It's News to Me."

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