THE BOWERY BOYS

Street Corner Radicals and the Politics of Rebellion

Peter Adams

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For Genevieve and Elliot

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Introduction: The Bowery Boys' New York

Like many studies of the New York Bowery Boys during the middle of the nineteenth century, this one started with Herbert Asbury's *Gangs of New York*, and as in any treatment of the subject, the first order of business was to separate myth from reality. Written in 1927, Asbury's lively account of Manhattan's underworld is filled with anecdote and a healthy dose of exaggeration. Martin Scorsese brought the *Gangs of New York* to the screen in 2002, introducing America to an urban subculture prone to being understood one-dimensionally. True, plenty of drunken mayhem occurred in the filthy streets and dark warrens of the city's lower east side during the three decades before the Civil War, and there was a conflict between Catholic and Protestant that could rival the battles of Belfast; but there was also a political dimension to the Bowery Boys under its charismatic leader Mike Walsh.

In part, this book is a biographical treatment of Walsh, who took the Bowery Boys into the principal debates over class and power in antebellum New York and New England. With his political faction, the Spartan Association, Walsh expressed the views of the Far Left of the Jacksonian democracy of the 1840s and early 1850s. Antebellum New York, as it developed into this country's commercial capital, gave rise to uniquely American variations of radical political thought. It was, of course, a unique place. The city was a mixture of wealth and abysmal poverty, high society and saloon brawls, mansions and immigrant shantytowns of jerry-rigged log cabins.

Mike Walsh organized the Bowery Boys into a political insurgency that challenged Tammany Hall to open its doors to the burgeoning industrial proletariat. (Courtesy of the Library of Congress)

The character of the city was shaped in part by a dramatic growth in population—from 200,000 in 1830 to 371,000 in 1845 and up to 630,000 just ten years later. The lower wards of the city (those below Canal Street) became increasingly working class and immigrant as wealth and opportunity migrated northward up the island of Manhattan. In 1842, the city saw the construction of 912 new buildings, but by 1845 that number rose closer to 2,000 new buildings in a single year. The price of land also began its upward climb, which saw no end in sight through the twentieth century, even among the shantytowns. For example a lot on William Street near Wall Street was sold for $51,000 in 1834 and quickly resold for $120,000 just two years later.[1]

Throughout the antebellum years, Manhattan streets were paved over farmland and old Indian trails at a quickening pace, yet many people remained without a decent roof over their heads. By 1864, the *New York Times* estimated that close to 20,000 squatters, who paid no taxes or rent, were scattered throughout New York City. Most of the city's shanty dwellers were Irish or German, with some living on Dutch Hill, a steep precipice at First Avenue and Fortieth Street. This squatters' colony was a home to people who lived in the most primitive conditions, tending livestock and working in nearby quarries and manure heaps.

City services, from schools to health care and fire and police, could hardly keep up. This was a city of volunteer fire brigades who battled each other for control of a hydrant as buildings burned; it was also a city of police ill-equipped to impose law and order. As the *New York Herald* observed in 1843, "The city is virtually without any municipal government." In 1844, as a committee of the Common Council reported that "lawless bands of ruffians stroll the city," police protection was still in the hands of the Watch Department, which consisted of only about 1,200 night watchmen, hardly adequate for a city of that size.[2]

Literally moonlighting, most night watchmen had day jobs and spent their time on duty sleeping in their small, telephone booth–sized shelters. Young men often made sport of tipping these boxes over, with the unsuspecting night watchman inside. Even as early as 1835, one newspaper asked, "Is our police [force] not sufficiently strong and well organized? What defect in our political system are we to attribute the power of mob law? We are on the verge of anarchy and the rule of law is at an end." With the police so ineffective, many New Yorkers were prepared to arm themselves.[3] Crime was so ubiquitous in much of the city that frontiersman Davy Crockett, during his visit to New York, commented, "I would rather risk myself in an Indian fight than venture among these creatures after night."[4]

Threats to public health were poorly understood or inadequately addressed in a city where thousands lived in cramped, poorly ventilated underground cellars that often flooded with refuse from the streets above. As late as 1857, nearly three-fourths of New York, including some of the most densely populated sections, lacked sewers. People were increasingly packed into tighter spaces; between 1820 and 1850 the number of residents occupying a typical city block went from 157 to 272.

In his colorful and offbeat account of the underside of mid-nineteenth-century New York, *Secrets of the Great City*, Edward Martin's description of life among the city's poor is typical of many contemporary accounts.

> These buildings seem overflowing with human beings.... The cellars are so dark that one unaccustomed to them cannot set foot before them without a bright light. They are filled with wretched inmates.... The walls are lined with bunks or berths and the woodwork and bedding are alive with vermin. Thousands of children are born in these foul places every year. They never see the light of day until they are able to crawl into the streets.[5]

Health conditions for children were worsened by the consumption of swill milk, a cheap product from cows fed on the waste products of distilleries. Less than one-half of children born in New York in the 1850s survived to the age of ten. Diseases like cholera were prevalent throughout the city, not just in the poorest neighborhoods; between July and October 1832, as many as 3,500 people died in an outbreak of Asiatic cholera, and in the 1849 epidemic, 1 percent of New York's population died.

Speaking for the immigrant and common laborer, Mike Walsh was familiar with the chronic overcrowding and unhealthy living conditions that distinguished life in working-class New York, calling it the "cause of more vice and misery, more suffering in every way than all other causes put together." The Bowery Boy described "buildings extended until a single inch of yard is not left, thus cutting off all chances of light or air—entirely destroying ventilation." Walsh also warned of the hazards of "slender-built tenements, which are occupied before the mortar used on the foundation is thoroughly dry." Sparing no descriptive, the leader of the Spartans saw the infant mortality rate as a "wholesale slaughter of the poor," noting quite accurately that one-third of the deaths in New York in 1846 were children under the age of five.[6]

Poverty and misery aside, antebellum New York had no shortage of entertainment. In the lower wards of the city were pits for every conceivable gladiatorial contest—between dogs and rats, men against men, and even bear wrestling at McLaughlin's Bear Pit at First Avenue and Tenth Street. Bowery Boy Ned Buntline, in his 1848 exposé of urban life, describes a

working-class Manhattan where "every house serves the double purpose of brothel and dance hall ... [with] rooms filled with ill-dressed men, and painted, bloated women drinking, dancing, shouting and carousing."

Another feature of the city was its immense German beer gardens that could accommodate up to 1,500 guests. One of the most famous, the Vauxhall Gardens, attracted a working-class patronage: "a favorite spot for mass meetings and the stamping grounds of the buncombe orators." Not surprisingly, P. T. Barnum found the Vauxhall a perfect place to begin his career with the famous mermaid hoax.[7]

New York was then, as it is now, a city of theaters. Castle Garden was the site of the New York performance of one of the first international superstars, Jenny Lind, dubbed the Swedish Nightingale. Barnum sponsored her 1850 U.S. tour, which drew thousands of fans to the docks to greet her arrival, including an escort of twenty volunteer fire companies.

Gotham was a city of free-flowing liquor and ample access to prostitutes, who entertained their customers out of dance halls, upper-class houses called bagnios, or on the streets. Just at the crossroads of Anthony, Leonard, Orange, and Centre streets, near the notorious Five Points, more than a dozen houses of prostitution operated in the 1830s and 1840s. Martin implies that child prostitution was not uncommon, and there were numerous reported cases of white slavery in which women as young as fourteen were raped and forced into prostitution.

This was an environment that nourished the gang subculture emerging in the 1820s and flourishing in the working-class wards of the city until their eclipse just before the Civil War. Contemporary reformers understood the relationship between the emergence of politically active gangs and the conditions that bred more than just physical disease. John Griscom, an early advocate of establishing a system of health inspectors, made a direct connection between the living conditions of the working classes in lower Manhattan and the New York gangs who aimed their ire at the city's privileged. "In times of riot and tumult," said Griscom, "the disturbers of the peace [are] from the cellars and alleys where they have never been taught to respect themselves, much less others."[8]

With a lifestyle and culture separate from middle-class society, most Bowery Boys were in their teens and early twenties, as the number of young, single workingmen in New York's manufacturing districts increased markedly in the first half of the nineteenth century. Richard Stott, in his study of nineteenth-century New York culture, notes that in 1820 those aged 16 to 45 made up 47 percent of the city's population, but by 1850 that age group represented 57 percent of the city.

Charles Loring Brace, who chronicled the life of New York's underclass, estimated there were as many as 10,000 homeless children roaming its

streets in 1852. With so many adolescents on the streets, New York's educational system could reach only about half of school-aged children. Brace, who opened the first lodging house for street boys in 1854, described the homeless youth as an "unconscious society" prone to violence and potentially, to revolution. Brace called this the dangerous class, embittered at a city that ignored their profound poverty.[9]

Not all the young men who called themselves Bowery Boys were at the bottom of the economic ladder. Many were shipbuilders, carpenters, butchers, and printers. Some owned property or were master butchers or tradesmen, making them middle class. Others were struggling journeymen or factory laborers, radicalized by an industrializing economy that created a new but less prosperous urban proletariat.

These were the young men lionized by Walt Whitman: "the splendid and rugged characters ... the firemen of *Mannahatta*, the target excursionist and Bowery Boy." Mike Walsh echoed the great poet's words with his own description of a vibrant city, "New York is to the union what ... ancient Rome was to its vast empire—what the heart is to the body ... and as she throbs fast or slow, healthy or unhealthy, the whole union has to keep time to her."

While Whitman was not a member of Walsh's Spartan Association, he admired Walsh for his tough-talking defense of the common man. Both men projected virility and masculine comradeship. Whitman derided the "impotent, loose in the knees" aristocrat just as Walsh praised political men of action, "with their backbone straight."

Over the years, the Bowery Boy became part of the mythology of a freewheeling city—the original urban legend. New York's Bowery Boy was a distinctive social type in dress, slang, and mannerism. Referring to the Bowery Boys who followed Butcher Bill Poole in the mid-1850s, the *New York Tribune* cautioned that "as long as gambling, drunkenness, prostitution, prize fighting and their associate evils continue, we shall have these characters." The group had a strict code of conduct, as evidenced in a small article in Walsh's newspaper, the *Subterranean*. When a couple of the "b'hoys" attacked an unnamed, but "prominent," New Yorker "contrary to orders," Walsh promised, "we will attend to them next week."[10]

The Bowery Boy's hair was cut short in the back and slicked down in the front with a thick grease or soap; ringlets of hair were pasted down in front of the ears. These were the soaplocks, a word that became synonymous with the Bowery Boys. Butt-ender was another word that meant Bowery Boy, a reference to his ever-present cigar. His speech was the beginning of the New York working-class accent that evolved through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In dress, the Bowery Boys, like many other gang members, wore the red shirt of the fire brigades. The rest of his outfit was a gaudy street look that

The original urban legend, the Bowery Boy was a distinctive New York type with slang, dress, and manners that helped define the city's working-class culture. (Courtesy of the Library of Congress)

included a black frock coat; plenty of jewelry; and heavy boots ideal for brawling, rushing to a fire, or an afternoon of target practice.

Of course, the mythology of the Bowery Boys originates from the b'hoys themselves and was embellished by each generation, including Herbert Asbury's description. There was the apocryphal career of firefighter Mose Humphreys. Humphreys was made famous by the actor Frank Chanfrau, who played Mose as a cigar-chomping stereotype of the b'hoy at the Bowery Theater to crowds of appreciative working-class New Yorkers in 1848. The play, *A Glance at New York*, ran for 70 nights; but one play was not enough to tell the whole story of Mose, his buddy Sikesey, and the Bowery gal Lizzie. There were sequels: *Mose in a Muss* and *Mose in California* during the gold rush. Mose was romanticized as a city-bred Paul Bunyan with amazing strength, boots soled with copper studs, a butcher's cleaver, and a keg of beer swinging from his belt. He could swim the Hudson in two strokes, jog around Manhattan in six hours, and thrust a lamppost like a battering ram at his adversaries.

A real Mose Humphreys was likely a celebrated member of the Lady Washington engine company, one of the many volunteer fire brigades that served as a vehicle for gang intimidation and power. In typical Bowery Boy style, he may also have worked by day as a journeyman in a print shop. According to various contemporary and later accounts, Lady Washington Company met up with the rival Peterson Company on the way back from a fire in the summer of 1836. They clashed, as often happened between fire companies, and a riot ensued, as other brigades rushed to the scene to take sides. Mose was defeated, and the Lady Washington engine was captured and vandalized. Mose's heroics in this battle soon became legend, but in defeat, he left New York for as far away as he could go: running a pool hall in Hawaii and organizing Honolulu's first fire department.

While Mike Walsh and his young partisans called themselves Bowery Boys, it would be a mistake to identify the Bowery Boys as a specific group at a specific time. There were several gangs who referred to themselves as Bowery Boys under different leaders during the antebellum years, but Walsh is distinguished by his success in leading the Bowery Boys into the political and social struggles of the newly industrialized working class. The Bowery Boys who followed Walsh under the banner of the Spartan Association, which he organized in 1840, were deeply politicized; they were what the *New York Tribune* called, the "adolescent shoulder hitters and politicians [who] take their first lessons in rowdyism."[11]

Walsh was not alone in harnessing the disaffected youth of the city to political ends, but he was the most effective and the most volatile. His was the prototype of the politicized gang, a model imitated by a variety of clubhouses in the poorer wards of New York City and other urban areas. The working-class gang as an organized faction "was [Walsh's] great technical

contribution to American politics," according to Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. in *Age of Jackson*.

Walsh articulated the frustration of those crowded into factories and sweatshops—immigrant or native-born—whom he called the shirtless democrats and subterraneans, signifying their status as the proletarianized underclass, denied the fruits of the market revolution and the levers of political power. This was a working class, he said, "submerged, buried and trodden under foot." For Walsh, the new capitalism that drove America's fast-paced industrialization produced a "gloomy, churlish money-worshipping spirit of the age" that "has swept nearly all the poetry of life out of the poor man's sphere."[12]

The Bowery Boy mobilized this undisciplined working class youth to challenge the power structure and the symbols of the moneyed aristocracy, whether that be in an attack against British stage actors or an election-day riot aimed at the entrenched leaders of the Democratic Party at Tammany Hall.

Historian Sean Wilentz, in his *Chants Democratic*, writes that for a short time, Walsh was able "to usurp the role of the one great political representative of the city's wage earners and struggling producers.... Walsh came to consider himself the only man two-fisted enough to lead the city's lower classes." Walsh, Wilentz says, was unique in molding these young Bowery Boys into a political movement that, while not wholly socialist, certainly advanced a forceful critique of America's emerging industrial capitalism.

Dabbling in uniquely American variants of socialist thought, the Bowery Boys found an ally in George Henry Evans, one of the foremost intellectuals of the Jacksonian left. Evans recognized Walsh's ability to pack a hall with cheering followers ready, if necessary, to transform New York's downtown streets into the barricades of revolutionary Europe. Walsh, joining Evans and other early labor activists, was at the center of the effort to build the first true industrial unions in America.

Arriving in New York from Ireland as a small boy, Walsh learned quickly the art of politics on the lower east side. Persuasive, a good mimic, and intelligent, Walsh was proud of his acquired street smarts and persistent rebelliousness—traits admired by his Bowery Boy and working-class followers. He was a passionate speaker who coined the phrase "vote early and often," as well as that quintessentially New York label "shyster." If these terms credited to him are any indication, Walsh was certainly regarded by many New Yorkers as a bullying opportunist and self-promoter.[13]

Educated for a short time at St. Peter's School in New York, Walsh claimed to have spent several years of his youth as a deck hand on a Mississippi riverboat. Recalling his experiences, likely inflated, Walsh said, "I happen to know something about the people of this land ... working bareheaded and barefooted." Fact and fiction are hard to separate in Walsh's life; he also purported to have fought in the Indian wars in Florida and to