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## The Philadelphia Review of Books

**AL CAPONE, ATLANTIC CITY, CHICAGO, LUCKY LUCIANO, MAFIA, RICHIE BOIARDO,  
SAINT VALENTINES DAY MASSACRE, THE BOOT**

### Imagine a Boot Stamping on a Human Face Forever

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([http://philabooks.files.wordpress.com/2013/10/cpep\\_0001\\_0001\\_0\\_img0043.jpg](http://philabooks.files.wordpress.com/2013/10/cpep_0001_0001_0_img0043.jpg))

by **Michael Buozis**

“Hooch,” a short story written by Charles Francis Coe, appeared on the back pages of the February 2, 1929 issue of the *Saturday Evening Post*. The story climaxed with a gang of bootleggers murdering four of their competitors. The four doomed runrunners meet in a shadowy garage to receive the latest shipment, but the delivery is late:

*“Where are they?” Flenger asked.*

*Before anyone could make answer the whole world seemed to explode about them. Dashes of flame cut through the gloom of the place. The terrific roar of shotguns and the mad scream of a machine gun ripped and shattered the silence.*

*Flenger fell in his tracks. Mitchell reeled back between the glowing headlights of the second truck, spread his arms over the radiator in an effort to keep himself on his feet, then groaned and sagged to the floor.*

*Baer whirled uncertainly, sank to his knees with a curse and hurled the remnant of the whiskey bottle in the general direction of the last flash he had seen.*

*It was Slenk who stood longest against the barrage of the rum killers.*

*A shadowy figure started around the end of the second truck. In his hands he carried a baby machine gun. A hoarse laugh crossed his lips. Calmly while Slenk watched him, terror in his eyes, the man lifted the gun, trained it upon him, and again the wild scream of 1,500 shots a minute tore at the walls of the garage.*

Eleven days after Coe's fictional story appeared, at around 10:50 on the morning of February 14, Saint Valentine's Day, John May, a Chicago safe-blower and mechanic to Bugs Moran's mob, turned and staggered toward a row of four assassins, two in civilian clothes wielding, one holding a shotgun, the other a machine gun, and two in police uniforms holding pistols. Six of May's companions – five of them Moran gangsters and the sixth a dentist named Dr. Reinhardt H. Schwimmer who kept the wrong company – lay dead or dying on the floor of the SMC Cartage Company garage on North Clark Street on the Northside of Chicago.

The assassins, unknown to the group, entered the garage minutes before and Moran's men, thinking the cops were there for a routine shakedown, lined up with their palms flat against the garage's whitewashed brick wall. The men in civilian clothes opened fire first. The men in uniform joined in. Before they left, more than 100 empty shells littered the oil- and blood-stained floor.

Bugs Moran, running late for that morning's meeting with his men, had seen what he believed to be two cops and two plainclothes detectives enter the garage. He walked two blocks away and sat in a booth, at a diner, eating his breakfast. When word of the massacre reached him, he spit out his food and said, "Only Capone would do a thing like that!"

Moran knew Capone would do a thing like that, because Capone had killed Moran's predecessor less than five years before.

Capone's men gunned down Dion O'Banion, longtime Prohibition-era boss of the Northside, at his flower shop on November 10, 1924, sparking a war between Capone's Italian-American mafia and the Irish-American Northside syndicate.

In 1929, Capone fled Chicago when he learned the authorities suspected him of ordering the Saint Valentine's Day Massacre.

He ended up in sunny Atlantic City and, some scholars say, his stay there coincided with the establishment of a nationwide network of organized crime unlike anything that existed before

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"I'm sorry, sir, but this hotel doesn't serve those of your persuasion," said the desk clerk at the Breakers Hotel on the boardwalk in Atlantic City. Capone used a fictitious, yet still Italian, name when signing the guest book and the clerk of the "aristocrat of Kosher hotels" asked him and his entourage to leave. Outside, before the neoclassical façade of the Breakers, Mayor Nucky Johnson, a red carnation in the button hole of his sharp jacket, ran over to Capone to apologize.

“All you fuckers follow me!” Johnson shouted after he and Capone exchanged a barrage of insults. Capone and his crew, which included New York mobsters Meyer Lansky and Nig Rosen, checked in to the nearby President Hotel as special guests of the mayor.

Lucky Luciano, on his deathbed more than thirty year later, told his biographer that the meeting that night, May 13, only three months after the Saint Valentine’s Day Massacre, cemented a relationship between criminal operations all across the country. The visiting mobsters took wicker rolling chairs to the beach where they rolled up their pant legs and let the rolling waves lap at their feet as they established ground rules for racketeering operations. Capone crossed a line when he killed seven of Moran’s men, drawing heat from Chicago city police and the feds. The mafia needed to tone down its public displays of violence, to get its fingers in as much legitimate business as possible, to integrate itself into police departments and city governments across the country.

But Luciano’s deathbed account of the mob summit has been disputed by scholars and historians in recent years.

“The evidence from the time – 1929 and shortly thereafter – doesn’t have all these big mob leaders, Lucky Luciano and all these mob leaders from around the nation,” Marc Mappen, author of *Prohibition Gangsters: The Rise and Fall of a Bad Generation*, told the *Press of Atlantic City*. “When you read the stuff from the time, it’s more focused on Chicago. It could have been entirely focused on Chicago and solving the differences there and maybe plausibly trying to reign in Al Capone.” The FBI, after all, didn’t publically recognize the existence of a national syndicate until nearly thirty years later, after the famous raid in Apalachin (<http://philadelphiareviewofbooks.com/2013/06/26/apalachin-and-its-aftermath-the-mafias-face-in-the-medias-mirror/>).

Richard Linnett, in his riveting new biography of Newark boss Richie Boiardo, writes “Luciano was the main architect of the syndicate, and Longy [Zwillman] reportedly played a role as a key strategist.” Luciano may have been a dubious “architect” of the Atlantic City summit’s eventual reputation, as his is the only existing account of the meeting, and he wouldn’t have hesitated to exaggerate his own importance in the discussions. Mappen is probably right about the meeting, but Zwillman’s presence, which is not disputed, emphasizes the preeminence of New Jersey families in mob affairs. Zwillman preceded Boiardo as boss of Newark and was associated with the notorious Murder Inc., a faction of mob enforcers who, contrary to Luciano’s account of the A.C. conference, killed between 400 and 1,000 rivals in the 1930s and 1940s.

So much for a national syndicate reining in its bad behavior.

If the general population gets its idea of the mob’s bad behavior from *The Godfather* and *The Sopranos*, we owe a lot of that picture to Richie “The Boot” Boiardo.

Linnett’s vivid descriptions, at the beginning of *In the Godfather Garden*, of an assassination attempt on the Boot and the mobster’s early criminal experiences, read like a piece of noir fiction, gritty and dark, but also physical and robust. “The car was a five-passenger, four-door Lincoln dual-cowl Sport

Phaeton..." Linnett begins his prologue:

*...a jet-black sedan with running boards, twin side-mount spare tires, and bulletproof glass. It bolted down the south side of Broad Street at four o'clock in the morning in downtown Newark. The sedan suddenly jerked across the wide, empty boulevard and into the opposing lane, pulling to the curb on the wrong side of the street in front of the Broadmoor Apartments....*

...

*As the Boot stepped out of the Phaeton, which had been given to him as a gift by his crew, shots rang out. An Associated Press report that appeared in the Asbury Park Press later reported that the Boot was felled by "slugs from a machine gun to his body" with "10 of the bullets pumped into his skull."*

At times, as Linnett makes apparent in this violent opening, Boiardo's life was brutal. The breathless recitations of mob-land murders lose their power after a while, but maybe this is the point; the Boot's adult life was filled with acts of ruthless violence that no amount of charm or personality could counterbalance. And Boiardo had charm and personality in excess. He relaxed by tending his own garden on his massive New Jersey estate, never ate processed foods and heaped affection on his grandchildren and his beloved Belgian shepherds. But he also kept a grill in the woods behind his mansion to incinerate the men who crossed him or became liabilities through no fault of their own.

Despite this wealth of great detail, Linnett occasionally allows his subject to get crowded out of his own biography. Jerry Catena, one of Boiardo's oldest friends, seems to be the star of the book for whole chapters; he makes more money than the Boot, pulls more influence and plays the role of the genteel gangster much better. Maybe this signals a shift from the preeminence of men like Capone, and organizations like Murder Inc., to a more mainstream form of racketeering and a kinder, gentler breed of made men.

Like Don Corleone's sprawling estate or Tony Soprano's late-century McMansion, the farm, Boiardo's rural New Jersey retreat, is the perfect setting for the demented fairy tale of mob life; the luxury and wealth create uncomfortable cognitive dissonance when coupled with the cremation of mobsters on a family barbecue pit. This cognitive dissonance, which Linnett evokes so well with his source material, is the foundation of our fascination with the mafia. How can we hang on every word and action of men who kill, steal and manipulate others for their own selfish aims? Why do we revile men like Luzerne County judges Mark Ciavarella and Michael Conahan (<http://philadelphiareviewofbooks.com/2013/03/11/omerta-in-luzerne-county/>) whose crimes amount to basically the same thing (without the brutal murders of course)? Perhaps because the crimes of political crooks affect us in more obvious, if no more insidious, ways than the crimes of gangsters.

Linnett does a great job of connecting the mafia with corruption in New Jersey state government and the changing face of urban America in the 1960s, a mob story not often told. How did organized crime infiltrate Atlantic City casinos and unions? How did the Italian-American syndicates react to

African American organized crime groups taking hold in inner cities? Linnett explores these questions, and more, through the lens of Boiardo and his family.

In the end, the Boot never gets his comeuppance, though nearly to the man, everyone lower in the organization than him suffers a horrible fate; this is how most mob stories go, and how most stories of corruption, in any form, end, with those at the top, who are ultimately responsible, left unscathed.

There are exceptions, of course. John Gotti died in prison. Bernie Madoff will die in prison. Plenty of mobsters and corrupt businessmen have paid for their crimes. But too often, a twist of fate, or the ineluctable failings of justice allow these men to escape real punishment. Kenneth Lay died in the comfort of his vacation home near Aspen, awaiting his sentence in the Enron case. Al Capone outlived the seven men murdered in the Saint Valentine's Day Massacre by 18 years. The Boot passed away peacefully in his bed at Newark's University Hospital on November 17, 1984, at the ripe old age of 93, outliving his son and nearly every man who pledged allegiance to him in fear of his murderous rage.

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### Discussed in this essay:

*In the Godfather Garden: The Long Life and Times of Richie "The Boot" Boiardo* by Richard Linnett. Rutgers University Press. 2013. 244 pages. \$25

**Michael Buozis's** work has appeared in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Bookslut*, *Philadelphia City Paper*, *NewsWorks*, *The Adirondack Review*, *Down & Out* and other journals and websites. He is the editor of *The Philadelphia Review of Books*.

**Photo:** Northside gang members following the Saint Valentine's Day Massacre, Chicago History Museum (<http://chicagohs.org/>)

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