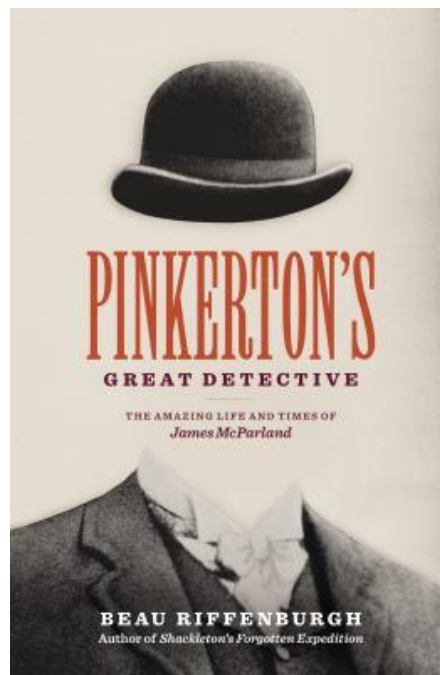




Pinkerton's Great Detective: The Amazing Life and Times of James McParland

Beau Riffenburgh

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The story of the legendary Pinkerton detective who took down the Molly Maguires and the Wild Bunch

The operatives of the Pinkerton's National Detective Agency were renowned for their skills of subterfuge, infiltration, and investigation, none more so than James McParland. So thrilling were McParland's cases that Sir Arthur Conan Doyle included the cunning detective in a story along with Sherlock Holmes.

Riffenburgh digs deep into the recently released Pinkerton archives to present the first biography of McParland and the agency's cloak-and-dagger methods. Both action packed and meticulously researched, Pinkerton's Great Detective brings readers along on McParland's most challenging cases: from young McParland's infiltration of the murderous Molly Maguires gang in the case that launched his career to his hunt for the notorious Butch Cassidy and the Wild Bunch to his controversial investigation of the Western Federation of Mines in the assassination of Idaho's former governor.

Filled with outlaws and criminals, detectives and lawmen, *Pinkerton's Great Detective* shines a light upon the celebrated secretive agency and its premier sleuth.

Pinkerton's Great Detective: The Amazing Life and Times of James McParland Details

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From Reader Review Pinkerton's Great Detective: The Amazing Life and Times of James McParland for online ebook

Fil says

My biggest issue with this book was that I couldn't get into Riffenburgh's writing style. The book picked up for me while reading about The Wild Bunch but other than that was slow going.

John Adkins says

In this book on James McParland, the Pinkerton's most renowned detective, Riffenburgh endeavors to answer "the question of who James McParland really was" (loc. 125). Was McParland a brave force for law and order or was he a tool of the mine operators who used his powers of deception to frame innocent union members for crimes they did not commit and to serve as an agent provocateur urging otherwise peaceful citizens to illegal acts? While Riffenburgh largely comes down on the side of the former he does not shy away from giving evidence of the latter, though he does at times seem to dismiss such evidence with little consideration.

McParland is rightly most famous/infamous for his actions related to the prosecution of the Mollie Maguires in Pennsylvania's coal country. As an undercover agent, McParland infiltrated the union and the the Ancient Order of Hibernians/Mollie Maguires. As Riffenburgh presents the story, McParland, while of necessity concealing his true identity from his compatriots, simply gathered information on illegal activities and reported back to his superiors in the Pinkerton Agency. In several instances he apparently provides warnings to individuals who are targeted for assassination though in other instances he claims to have either been too infirm to give warning or states that the risk to his own life was too extreme. In several instances McParland played a central role in the planning of illegal activities though the author suggests that "he trod a fine line to avoid being a participant." (loc. 1327)

McParland's actions defined the way that what would become known as the "Labor Spy" operated. Central to the activities of the labor spy were the infiltration of the union organization along with working one's way into union office holding. A notable follow up to McParland was the work of CE Lively who infiltrated the mine organizations first in Colorado during the 1912-3 troubles and later in West Virginia in the aftermath of the Matewan Massacre. The parallels between McParland's dramatic courtroom appearance with the Mollie Maguires and CE Lively's during Sid Hatfield's trial are astonishing.

Throughout the book the author shows very little sympathy for the labor movement and gives a rather one-sided account of events such as the Haymarket Affair (loc. 3190). I would assume that the bias stems from heavy use of Pinkerton Company archives in the construction of the narrative but unfortunately the eARC that I reviewed did not include either the endnotes or bibliography from the finished volume.

The book follows the remainder of McParland's career as he oversaw the Pinkerton's Agency's western division and waged a personal struggle against the Western Federation of Miners (WFM). This struggle climaxed in a multi-year investigation and trial whose chief aim was the conviction of Big Bill Haywood, head of the WFM. This investigation and trial saw McParland use dubious legal means to indict defendants in multiple jurisdictions in order to ensure that any time that the accused were released on bond from one charge that another charge was there ensuring their rearrest and transport to yet another cell as well as at several points perjuring himself on the witness stand (and likely the fabrication of confessions from several witnesses). The trials were the show trials of the day with none other than Clarence Darrow for the defense.

In the end McParland failed to secure a conviction of Haywood and he was let go free.

Riffenburgh has crafted a splendid narrative of a somewhat elusive character. While I feel that he was overly generous to McParland and lacking in empathy for the right of workers, this volume is an excellent addition to the literature on the Pinkerton's and labor history in general. I highly recommend this book especially when read together with other works written from a more labor friendly perspective.

Caitlin says

Before we had an FBI, the United States had the Pinkerton's Detective Agency, a private security agency that worked on behalf of members of the government (providing private security for President Abraham Lincoln), of various law enforcement efforts (particularly in hunting outlaws in the Wild West), and as union busters by various industries (particularly mining and railroad concerns. In my head, Pinkerton's detectives are synonymous with defeating outlaws and bashing the heads of workers trying to get better safety regulations and pay from their corporate overlords.

Pinkerton's Great Detective tells the story of James McParland - the agencies most famous operative. This is a man who went undercover to infiltrate the Molly Maguires, met Sherlock Holmes in The Valley of Fear, and foiled an attempt to assassinate Idaho Governor Frank Steunenberg. He was a ruthless, tireless, inventive man whose constant presence on behalf of business' attempting to destroy the rights of their workers also makes him very unsympathetic to me, despite my admiration of his sheer courage. He was an interesting man in an interesting time and Mr. Riffenburgh places him firmly within the context of the laws and mores of his time.

This book is very detailed and provides a great deal of information about people and events surrounding McParland, especially important for fleshing out a story where facts are very thin on the ground. The pacing of this book is a bit slow, best devoured in chunks between other lighter reading, but it's an interesting story and, while it doesn't redeem McParland for me it did teach me lots of things about his time that I didn't know.

Leah says

this reviews goes live on the blog **11/18**

Two of my guilty pleasures are a good detective story and biographies. *Pinkerton's Great Detective* delivers both in one tidy package, proving once again that sometimes the truth really is stranger than fiction.

James McParland, renowned sleuth, had such a mastery over his secrets that his own birthday is not known. Early on in the book Riffenburgh addresses this by admitting that for a biography, there might be more than a few inaccuracies. Because of this, *Pinkerton's Great Detective* winds up being less about that great detective, and more about Pinkerton, his agency, Charlie Siringo (a fascinating man in his own right!), and the cases McParland investigated: the Molly Maguires, Butch Cassidy and the Wild Bunch. Even Sir Arthur Conan Doyle makes an appearance.

Pinkerton's Great Detective begins in Ireland where McParland was born and raised along with eleven siblings. While McParland was still a baby the Great Famine struck, devastating Ireland's potato crops and leaving millions of people starving - if not dead. When he was still young, McParland left his home for

America, a land not exactly warm and welcoming to the Irish at that time. The Civil War left entire cities ravaged, yet James was still determined to strike a new life - literally.

In his undercover work in the Molly Maguire case, James adopted the name Jim McKenna and constructed an entirely new identity. He lived and breathed McKenna, going so far as to invent false arrest records. This was the case that made his career and Riffenburgh clearly did his research: a sizeable portion of the novel is devoted to the Molly Maguires - or MMs as McParland referred to the gang - and rightfully so. McParland's time spent in the Old West is also covered in remarkable detail.

Readers hesitant to try non-fiction need not worry: although *Pinkerton's Great Detective* is painstakingly researched, Riffenburgh doesn't lose focus of the story. The book isn't bogged down with technical jargon or unnecessary details. While the ambiguity and inaccuracy does detract from the story at times the book remains action-packed and entertaining. After all, how could a story about a spy be boring?

Pinkerton's Great Detective will easily appeal to fans of a wide range of subjects: history, the Old West, detectives and true crime. Are you a reader new to or curious about non-fiction? *Pinkerton's Great Detective* is a wonderful starting point with its easy-to-follow narrative (Erik Larson's books come to mind) and intriguing characters.

Stephen says

I had high hopes for this book, but it fails in a number of ways, perhaps because the author never seemed sure what he wanted this book to be. The preface presents an incident in the life of James McParland in a spirit of adventure, danger, and derring-do, proving both that McParland lived a life that could produce a page turner, and that Riffenburgh *could* write such a page turner.

But this book doesn't offer that page turner once we leave the preface's roman numerals behind. Clearly, the origin of this book, as revealed in the introduction, is in just that spirit of adventure; the author first learned about McParland from multiple movies, among other sources. But that is not the sort of life Riffenburgh portrays.

Nor is Riffenburgh particularly able to manage a more academic work, reexamining the character of McParland after the detective's early supporters and later detractors, though this Riffenburgh sets this out as a primary goal. Perhaps his editor restrained him, perhaps he just didn't carry the goal through, but the argument Riffenburgh makes is forgotten for much of the book, lost in a (rather bland) narrative. At times random thoughts are raised which might have contributed to an overall argument, but the author does nothing to connect them together.

It might not have proven to be the popular history this book was marketed as, but at least if Riffenburgh had carried his argument off, it would have been worth something. Instead *Pinkerton's Great Detective* proves to be neither a satisfying narrative nor an interesting assessment of McParland's life.

Finally, though I do not hold this against Riffenburgh since I don't know how much this was his input as opposed to that of his publisher, but a considerable amount of material that once would have graced the back of the book is instead relegated to a website. While I can understand the impulse to save unnecessary paper--and I can actually appreciate that the website might allow an author to include documents that never would have made it into a book in print--a lot of the material moved to the web really ought to be in the book. First are the four maps which would have helped my appreciation of McParland's movements, how far he had to go to escape the reach of the Molly Maguires, etc. I didn't even realize at first that those existed at all

because I had skimmed over the notice about online supplementals (And how much space would four maps take up in a book, seriously?). Then there are the notes. The author includes numbers referencing readers to the notes, but when they flip back, there are no notes. I would have had to stop everything, get to a computer and check what the note said, or else forget which note it was I wanted to look up. Considering that most notes are only going to be a line or two long, I didn't bother going on line to find out what they would say, especially when I wasn't already near a computer when I decided I wanted more material. I could have read this book on a kindle or some other device if I had wanted, but I chose paper and ink, and I did not appreciate being made to miss out on material if I did not want to check--or even if I didn't have access to--the internet. Some of us go outside to read, or do it in any number of places where we can't readily check the internet (planes, anyone?).

Checkman says

On December 30, 1905 the former governor of Idaho , Frank Steunenberg, was killed by a bomb that was wired to the front gate leading to his Caldwell home. Within a very short time suspicion fell on the Western Federation of Miners. As governor Stunenberg had dealt with striking miners in northern Idaho by declaring martial law and requesting Federal troops be sent in. He got the troops. The action proved to be successful and broke the strike, which earned Stunenberg the union's undying enmity. It has also been argued that the mass round-ups of the striking miners, while hated, were made worse by the fact that the soldiers ,who enforced the crackdown, were black.

Whatever the exact reason (or reasons) a contract was put out on Stunenberg and in December 1905 it was fulfilled. Suspicion quickly fell on the WFM, but in 1905 Idaho had no state police. My employer, the Caldwell city police department, was two years old (founded in 1903) and had two officers. The CPD ,at this time, functioned more as an enforcer of civic ordnances, running off vagrants and arresting drunks (much of which is still unchanged). The scope of the investigation was simply beyond the scant resources available to the city and the state. Like so many other local and state governments at this time Idaho turned to the Pinkerton Detective Agency to conduct the investigation.

James McParland ,superintendent of the Pinkerton Denver office, took charge of the investigation. In the end the actual assassin ,Albert Edward Horsley assassin would be arrested and sent to the state prison in Boise for the rest of his life. He would die there in 1954 at the age of eighty-eight. Three of the leaders of the WMF ,George Pettibone, William Haywood and Charles Moyer, were arrested in Colorado and shipped to Idaho under McParland's supervision and charged with murder. There followed a heavily publicized "trial of the century" (ninety years before O.J. Simpson's "trial of the century"). Amazingly all three defendants were found not guilty. A verdict which stunned many people at the time.

I was sworn in as a Caldwell police officer in October 2000. My wife and I did not live there when I was sworn in so we rented the first place we found. It was an apartment exactly one block to the north of Frank Stunenberg's former home and scene of his assassination (which burned to the ground a few years after his death). Not surprinsgly I became interested in the case. In December 2005 (as the one-hundredth anniversary of the assassination approached) I dove into Big Trouble: A Murder in a Small Western Town Sets Off a Struggle for the Soul of America by J. Anthony Lukas. Mr. Lukas's last book is a massive tome about Stunenberg's murder. Mr. Lukas covered the criminal investigation, court case, social, economic and political conditions in the United States at the turn of the century and the various personalities that were involved. It's a dense book and it took me several months to get through. Go to my page if you're interested in my full review.

I mention Mr. Lukas's book because James McParland is given a significant amount of pages in it. I was unfamiliar with the Pinkerton until I read *Big Trouble* and was interested in knowing more about the Irish detective. However in 2006 there still wasn't much information available about The Great Detective. His lifelong ability to cloud the facts about him was still being felt almost a century after his death (1919). That has since changed.

Beau Riffenburgh's biography is a dense read. Though not as heavily detailed as Lukas's account (400 pages vs. 900 pages) it's still a dense read. He especially goes into great detail regarding McParland's undercover investigation of the Molly Maguires in the Pennsylvania coal fields and the Stunenberg Murder. Along the way there are detailed chapters regarding the famous "cowboy detective" Charles Siringo (who also worked on the Stunenberg case) and the running down of Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid. Considering that many of the Pinkerton documents were "edited" before being turned over to the Library of Congress (can anyone say that they are surprised) and that McParland seemed to enjoy muddying the waters about his background (lies, exaggerations, omissions and so on) Mr. Riffenburgh managed to produce a comprehensive biography. In some cases he is forced to theorize based on primary sources of a periphery nature (letters referring to McParland, news articles, court cases), but overall the work is coherent and free of heavy bias. He addresses that McParland seemed to have some questionable ethics, but also acknowledges that we should be wary of judging the man by our present day standards. Today's bastard was yesterday's hero and much that was done was not only acceptable to many, but perfectly *legal*. The legal issues are particularly focused on when reviewing the investigation and prosecution of the Molly Maguires.

I appreciate that because all too often historians are all too willing to judge the past by today's standards. Personally I have found such tactics to be too simplistic and even a little cowardly. I applaud Mr. Riffenburgh's willingness to address some of the more recent conclusions with this stance. He isn't an apologist for McParland, but he isn't a blind hater either.

Pinkerton's Great Detective has its faults. Maps, references, appendices, bibliography and notes are not included with the book. Instead the reader is directed to <https://www.susannagregory.com/beauri...> (Susanna Gregory is his wife and also a writer) or the publisher's website (inactive). Now I understand the economic reasoning behind not including dozens of pages of notes. It's the 21st century after all and why kill more trees when it isn't necessary? However could four pages of maps have made that big of a difference? Especially when deep into the Molly Maguires section. Having the map of Pennsylvania within the book (instead of my computer) would have been nice. I recommend taking the extra time to review the notes by the way. They are very informative and add much to the read.

Overall though the book is well written and I found it to be an excellent companion piece to Mr. Lukas's *Big Trouble*. Some of the mystery surrounding McParland is cleared away and it also provides an interesting addition to the history of the "Old West" which was far more complicated than the movies and Louis L'Amour would have us believe.

Ronnie Cramer says

One of those well-researched works that really transports you back to the time and place where it is set.

Travis Starnes says

Riffenburgh is a very detailed writer and has done his homework on McPharland. I will admit that although I was familiar with the Pinkertons and many of the situations described here, until I read this book I was not aware of McPharland. Although I have little to judge it against, Riffenburgh seems to have completely cataloged McPharland's life and there seems little left out. It is quite amazing how many major events in the late 19th century that the detective was involved in.

The writing is well done and easy to read. Those expecting a true crime novel or form of mystery might find it slow as a biography it reads very well. As with most biographies it starts with his parents and early life and hits all the events and relationships in his life, as well as many of the minor events. The book is more narrative than most biographies I have read, although it is still more a biography than a narrative history. Riffenburgh's writing helps the book flow very well and I found it to be an enjoyable read.

<http://homeofreading.com/pinkertons-great-detective/>

Trish says

For folks who imagine themselves interested in working for the Secret Service, Homeland Security, the FBI, or as a spy, this book can tell you a little about what it was like *in the way back* in America. You may find you don't have the constitution for it after all.

This book is subtitled "The Amazing Life and Times of James McParland," if that really was his name. McParland began his undercover career in the anthracite mines of Schuylkill County, Pennsylvania reporting on the murderous Molly Maguires in 1875. Remarkably, he was so intent upon keeping himself alive amidst the mayhem, he didn't get to reporting on killings until after the deeds were done. Such was the violence of the crimes that first-hand observer McParland got physically ill...the stress of undercover work gave him severe intestinal problems and his hair fell out in handfuls.

Years of trials and testimony regarding events in Pennsylvania followed and then McParland went West, presumably to get away from those that knew his face. He pursued Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, and worked to bring down strikers working with the Western Federation of Miners. Almost from the start, I admit I found myself disliking this "devout Catholic" who came to be "powerful, successful, and respected...Even decades later the hierarchy of the Catholic Church was still honoring him for his work...as well as for his devotion to the [Denver] parish and his many contributions to the building of Denver's Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception." My reservations about the man and my conflicted feelings about law enforcement in the early days of the West undoubtedly tell more about me than McParland. Perhaps popular movies about the period influence me still.

This dogged and detailed history is a must read for those interested in the Molly Maguires, or The Wild Bunch, or the beginnings of Pinkerton's undercover investigations and expansion out West. For those with a more cursory interest, flipping through will yield nuggets that stay with you on your journey to understand our historical underpinnings.

Mandy says

Pinkerton's National Detective Agency must surely be one of the most famous such agencies in the world, and James McParland was one of its most renowned operatives. Beau Riffenburgh has meticulously and exhaustively delved into the recently opened archives to write this very detailed account of McParland's life and career, and the cases he was involved with, from the Molly Maguires to Butch Cassidy.

McParland was a dedicated and loyal operative and faced danger, violence and betrayal throughout his life. It was without doubt an exciting and challenging time, and yet we know very little about the man himself, as he left no diaries, letters or any other personal accounts. We know he married and had children, but we can't know what he thought, what he felt and what he was like as a husband, father, brother. This means that the book is a very dry account and it's difficult to engage with any of the characters we meet. This is a fascinating period in American history, but Riffenburgh gets too bogged down in detail about the cases Pinkerton's took on, which for the general reader just becomes overwhelming. For a serious scholar of the era, so much detail is very useful, but I found myself simply glazing over at times, and tended to skip great chunks. This is a shame, as the book deserves a wide readership and would no doubt have one if the writing style was more accessible.

Nevertheless, this is a valuable and essentially very interesting book, and I learnt a great deal from it.

Carolyn says

Exhaustive research forms the basis for this detailed history of James McParland. As other reviewers have noted, the author should be praised for unearthing a wealth of arcane information and distilling it into a coherent, readable story. Nevertheless, I found myself exhausted in the reading. The style is decidedly academic, so don't expect a thrilling John Grisham pace. I agree with other reviewers that the characters remained uni-dimensional. I did find excerpts from actual trial testimonies entertaining -- reminiscent of Jeff Bridge as Rooster Gogburn in "True Grit". Historically, it was informative to follow the struggles between organized labor and mining operators in (Pennsylvania anthracite mines). Also, "fake news" was a problem in the Wild West even back in the late 1800's.

Sharon Tyler says

Pinkerton's Great Detective: The Amazing Life and Times of James McParland by Beau Riffenburgh is an intriguing exploration of the legendary Pinkerton detective who took down the Molly Maguires and the Wild Bunch. The operatives of the Pinkerton's National Detective Agency were renowned for their skills of subterfuge, infiltration, and investigation. This is particularly true of McParland. So thrilling were McParland's cases that Sir Arthur Conan Doyle included the cunning detective in a story along with Sherlock Holmes. There are many conflicting accounts of McParland's life, and this book looks at the likelihood of what is true in light of the variety of stories and known facts about his life and times.

Pinkerton's Great Detective is the result of Riffenburgh digging into the recently released Pinkerton archives. Colorful narratives and a sharp look at the conflicting stories are combined to give interested readers the first biography of McParland and the agency's cloak-and-dagger methods. There are a lot of theories and story explored within the research and suppositions of Riffenburgh. The result of the meticulous research makes for a dense but very interesting read. I was intrigued by the life and mysterious portrayed, but had to put the book down a few times to read something of a less dense nature. There are just so many stories about

McParland, some perfectly possible and others completely impossible, that Riffenburgh had a huge amount of ground to cover and make accessible to interested parties. I think the result is well done, thoroughly researched and vetted, and an interesting read.

Pinkerton's Great Detective is an educational and interesting read for anyone interested in real detectives and the evolution of cloak and dagger detecting in the early days of the Pinkerton's National Detective Agency. With the re-surfing interest in Sherlock Holmes, I think that Riffenburgh will find an eager audience of individuals interested in one of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's inspirations.

Sandie says

Hard as it is to believe, the detective has not existed as an occupation for that long. When one considers that many city police departments came into existence in the late 1800's, it is less surprising to hear that detectives, as we now know them, also got their start in this same time period. Pinkerton, the ultimate name in private detective agencies, started in the 1850's. It rose to national prominence largely due to the sensational cases that featured the agency's first famous detective, James McParland.

McParland was an Irish immigrant, who came to the United States with his brother. After trying several occupations, he realized that his talents were best used as an investigator. At this time, the private detective had as much power as did the police, and often handled cases that were beyond the resources of local law enforcement. McParland parleyed his first big case into national fame and then rose in the ranks of the agency. He remained a detective for the rest of his life.

The book is broken into three sections, each featuring one of the large cases McParland worked on. Each case took months or even years of effort to bring the criminals to justice. The first case was that of the coal miners in Pennsylvania. The miners were attempting to start the first union to represent the working men against the owners of the mines. Most miners were Irish, especially those involved in the secret organization called the Molly Maguires. The mine owners wanted to break up the Maguires, as they suspected them of crimes such as intimidation, thievery and even murder. McParland was sent in undercover to learn the inner workings of the Maguires and to help control them. He spent months in this nerve-wracking occupation, playing each side against the other while learning the innermost secrets of the organization. When he left the organization, he was key in the many trials that accused Maguire leaders of organized murders and maimings. This case was so sensational that McParland's name became known across the country, and he became the epitome of law and justice in the 1870's.

McParland was too notorious after this to work again in the East, so the company moved him out to a Western office, where he soon became one of the main managers. Under his management, the second big case occurred. The Pinkerton's were hired to track and catch the Hole In The Wall Gang, better known today as Butch Cassidy and The Sundance Kid. Their organization of loosely joined outlaws terrorized the West, robbing banks and trains and murdering those who got in their way. While the main individuals escaped to South America, McParland's investigation succeeded in breaking the back of the gang and bringing most of the men to justice.

After this, McParland returned to his roots and worked on the case of the miners attempting to organize in Colorado and Idaho. The same tactics as he had seen in Pennsylvania were taking place, with murders and beatings commonplace. The job increased in prominence when a former governor of Idaho, Frank Steunenberg, was assassinated. McParland again used his tactics of coercing confessions from those in the mining organizations against the leaders, as he had done in Pennsylvania.

McParland's fame, or notoriety, helped define what a private detective was, and what role he could play in society. Most saw McParland as a hero, who used whatever means were available to crush organizations that terrorized entire states, and that local law enforcement were often powerless against. Yet, those on the opposite side saw him as a traitor and a rat, an informer of the worst sort, who would stop at nothing to gain his wins. These two opposing viewpoints are still prevalent today, depending on one's view of the labor wars. Beau Riffenburgh has written a meticulously researched history of James McParland, and the large cases that consumed the country as law enforcement became stronger and the unions and the capitalists fought their battles. The reader is given all the facts and left to make their own decision on whether McParland is a hero or a horror. This book is recommended for history lovers and for those interested in the law enforcement occupation.

Greg Chandler says

Extremely detailed account of the "life and times" of James McParland.

As Pinkerton's top detective, McParland infiltrated the "Molly Maguires" and brought many of them to "justice" on the end of a hangman's rope. Cowboy detectives under McParland's direction as superintendent of Pinkerton's western division chased Butch Cassidy, Sundance Kid and their "Wild Bunch" across the deserts of the "Old West" and drove them off to South America. The agency captured leaders of the WMF, hard men who fought for miner's rights with murder and dynamite. McParland wheedled confessions that should have led to convictions, had he not run up against his nemesis Clarence Darrow in court.

McParland was the best known and most effective detective in the agency that defined "private detective", the Pinkertons. Yet his private life is left unknown and his professional life is distorted by world views. He was the savior that put hard, dangerous men away. He was the enemy and downfall of unions, destroying workers' rights through any means available. He was willing to trick bargain and lie under oath. As Rippenburgh sums up: "the Great Detective, who was, is, and who will forever remain, an enigma."

This book will probably appeal more to readers of history than devotees of mystery novels. This is no page turner. It does strive to present an unbiased view of a controversial man - or more correctly, to acknowledge the controversies while exposing the facts and agendas behind them.

Lynne Perednia says

Some of the great parts of the film Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid come when Paul Newman turns to Robert Redford and asks, "Who are those guys?"

That question eventually led Beau Riffenburgh to this biography of Pinkerton agent James McParland, who tracked the Hole in the Wall Gang and went undercover in tough mining towns across the country. A poor Irish immigrant who raised himself from nothing and lived by his wits for years, McParland drew both praise and scorn during his lifetime as an undercover agent who infiltrated the Molly Maguires in an era of deadly Pennsylvania coal mine violence before heading out west.

Riffenburgh is a conscience researcher and writer who uncovers the records of McParland's actions and writings. This is essential in a biography such as this, as one's view of the subject may well depend on one's political viewpoint. Was McParland a turncoat to his people or someone who served justice?

Well, it depends a great deal on one's point of view. Riffenburgh does a great job of placing McParland

within his own times. Those were far different from today's in that criminal cases were brought by those who could afford to prosecute. But there also are parallels to today with company owners who want to pay workers the least amount possible, have them indebted to the company store and still be able to fire them at will.

For McParland to drop into such a situation, and possibly with the ultimate goal of making sure he followed the tenets of his church, Riffenburgh makes it easy to see that his subject's role was not easy. The author also uses the array of historical record available to not sway the reader, but instead to place the reader squarely within the context of what can be shown of those turbulent times.

The author also does a thorough job of describing the times in which McParland operated from more than one viewpoint. Mine owners and workers who were either indebted to the company store or faced being fired did not view the world in the same way, and Riffenburgh does well to describe both viewpoints. The even-handed approach may not change anyone's mind, but it does bring into focus what the stakes were for everyone involved, including McParland.

For anyone who wondered the same thing that Paul Newman did in that classic film, and for those wonder about those times, Pinkerton's Great Detective is an excellent way to find some answers.
