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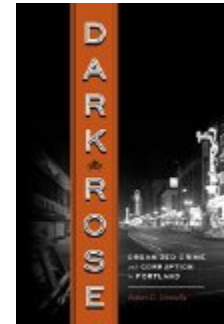
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Robert C. Donnelly. *Dark Rose: Organized Crime and Corruption in Portland*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011. xiii + 202 pp. \$22.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-295-99111-5.

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Commissioned by David T. Benac



During the past several decades, it has become common for scholars and other writers on Pacific Northwest history to employ such superlatives as “paradise” or “eden” or “Arcadia” in their titles (and often in their perspectives as well) as if well-watered and green foliage was the essence of heaven on earth. In Chamber of Commerce terms, Seattle is the “Emerald City,” and Portland the “Rose City.” Even the quirky portrayal of Portlanders in the television series, *Portlandia* has done little to diminish the perception of a Pacific Northwestern ecotopia in which all is well. But in his *Dark Rose: Organized Crime and Corruption in Portland*, Robert C. Donnelly sees other colors in the history of Portland. Instead of green and rose, he sees darker hues in his account of post-World War II corruption and racketeering in the city.

In Donnelly’s engaging account, like most other large and growing cities, Portland’s government and police were riddled with bossism and bribery during the 1950s. A certain amount of this corruption was the work of local underworld figures, but it also involved some labor unions, most significantly, the Teamsters. In Donnelly’s view, the big unions had been made into powerful political forces by the Wagner Act (1935), and some of that power flowed in illegal channels. The reactionary Taft-Hartley Act of 1947 outlawed a number of common labor-organizing tactics, which had the effect of driving them underground. Bribes, physical intimidation (what Senator Robert Taft called “goon squads”), and virtual control over local Democratic Party organizations made the Portland Teamsters a powerful force in city affairs, both public and private.

In the mid-1950s, Portland’s corrupt establishment received national attention as a result of a series of

hard-hitting exposés in the city’s main newspaper, *The Oregonian*. Not otherwise known for their investigative reporting, *Oregonian* reporters James Miller, Wallace Turner, and William Lambert revealed a corruption so widespread that scarcely a city bureau escaped it. That included the Police Bureau, as any long-standing racketeering is dependent on police complicity. Not all police officers were on the take, of course. In fact, it was a policeman who tipped *Oregonian* reporters that he had been offered a bribe by James Elkins, a career criminal, morphine addict, and Portland’s most powerful racketeer in the 1950s.

As reportage of Portland’s rackets unveiled a city government “shot through” with organized crime and corruption, the city attracted the attention of investigators for the U.S. Senate’s Select Committee on Improper Activities in the Labor or Management Field—an oddly weak and unwieldy name—usually referred to as the McClellan Committee. One of those investigators was Robert F. Kennedy, the committee’s chief counsel. Elkins was the only Portland racketeer to cooperate with the committee. Though subpoenaed to testify before the committee, those who were under indictment in Oregon—including a former Portland district attorney—cited their Fifth Amendment rights against self-incrimination. Incumbent Portland mayor (and former county sheriff) Terry Schrunk, although he did not “take the Fifth,” dodged the committee’s questions for eleven days before refusing to testify further. Upon his return to Oregon, though, Schrunk turned himself in to state authorities. He would later be acquitted, largely because most of those who testified against him were also under indictment, and because the Portland jury was unwilling to convict one of their own. The Senate investigation had

given Portland a “black eye” and many thought Schrunk had been framed and railroaded.

A great deal of the evidence that the McClellan Committee collected in Portland would be used later when Kennedy famously went after Teamster president Jimmy Hoffa. Elkins was contacted several times by Hoffa, who sought a face-to-face meeting. Assuming his life would have been in danger, Elkins refused. As U.S. attorney general, Kennedy would later shield Elkins from prosecution by federal attorneys in Oregon, presumably because of his value as an informer. Whatever Kennedy’s reason, Turner, one of the original *Oregonian* reporters, blamed Kennedy’s Oregon Democratic primary defeat in 1968 on his attacks on Schrunk. They voted for Eugene McCarthy instead.

In addition to offering a detailed and engaging account of Portland’s underworld in the 1950s, Donnelly has come to a number of broader interpretive conclusions, one of which bears noting here. He compares 1950s American cities in general, and Portland in particular, to those of the Gilded Age and early Progressive eras. Rampant crime, organized vice, and official corruption were the result of rapid and uncontrolled growth, made all the more rapid by industrialization in the 1880s, 1890s, and 1900s. Likewise, Donnelly notes that the wartime production boom from 1942 to 1945 (and perhaps as early as 1940), the mass migration of rural Americans seeking high-paying wages, and huge postwar economic growth brought with them many of the same conditions—at least the social and political ones. With big cities—especially those only recently big—comes a certain amount of crime.

One wonders, though, what the effect of suburbanization and exurban development—otherwise known as

“white flight”—has been on urban crime; the inner—rather than the outer—city. It is to the credit of Portland’s officialdom in the past few decades that some of the most livable neighborhoods in Portland are essential to downtown and close to the core. Skid Row has been revitalized with open markets and consumer-oriented development. Warehouses and light industrial structures in the city’s Pearl District are tuning into comfortable lofts and apartments. Whole Foods and other natural-food stores are within walking distance. Naturally, though, as the center of Portland “gentrifies,” the working classes have been pushed to the outer neighborhoods and suburbs. To a certain extent, what has happened in Harlem with soaring property values and rents is happening in Portland. How one sees this, of course, has much to do with one’s income and class consciousness. Against the better angels of my nature, I confess I kind of like it.

In his foreword to *Dark Rose*, Carl Abbott, a professor at Portland State University, draws a clear line between the “old” and the “new” Portland. “Portland has not always been Portland,” he writes. Progressive mayors and other civic leaders of the 1970s and beyond transformed Portland—or at least Portland’s reputation—from seedy and vice-ridden to what *Money Magazine* has rated America’s No. 1 city to live in. In the 1970s, Portland mayor Neil Goldschmidt led the city’s metropolitan area in developing one of the country’s most-effective public transportation systems. President Jimmy Carter would acknowledge his leadership in this regard by appointing him secretary of Transportation in 1979. Last, but not least, Portland is widely known as the home of the greatest number of micro-breweries in the United States. Portland is to beer as Seattle is to coffee. I kind of like that, too.

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