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‘American Demon’ Review: The Mad Butcher of Kingsbury Run

After sterling success with the Untouchables in Chicago, Eliot Ness tried to clean up Cleveland. A clever serial killer there tarnished his record.



Eliot Ness (center) and colleagues in Cleveland. PHOTO: THE CLEVELAND PRESS COLLECTION, CLEVELAND STATE UNIVERSITY

By Edward Kosner

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Eliot Ness is an indelible figure in American folklore—the straight-arrow Prohibition agent who ended Al Capone’s reign as the bootlegging and prostitution kingpin of Chicago. Capone was actually imprisoned on a tax-evasion rap, but Ness and his intrepid band of “Untouchables,” who liked to ram their trucks through the doors of the mobster’s secret breweries, forever get the credit in memory.

Ness was still in his 20s when he tormented Capone in the early days of the Great Depression, and after Chicago his career as a paragon of law-enforcement was inevitably an anticlimax. Long after his death he won enduring fame, played by Robert Stack on TV and by Kevin Costner in the 1987 hit movie “The Untouchables.” Now the ace true-crime writer Daniel Stashower has exhumed a gory late episode in the Ness saga that casts a fresh and not especially flattering light on this gangbusting icon.

“American Demon: Eliot Ness and the Hunt for America’s Jack the Ripper” tells the story of the long pursuit of the so-called Mad Butcher, a fiend who murdered and dismembered more than a dozen victims in Cleveland in the mid-to-late 1930s. Their deftly carved torsos, arms, legs and feet, sometimes neatly packaged in newspaper, were mostly found strewn about a shantytown wasteland called Kingsbury Run bordering Lake Erie. Their decapitated heads were sometimes nestled with the bodies, sometimes secreted elsewhere. “MAD BUTCHER STRIKES AGAIN” shrieked the Cleveland papers with alarming—and circulation-boosting—regularity.

Ness’s dapper college-boy persona masked courage and steely resolve; he was a complicated character. In Chicago, the author writes, Ness “often seemed to be trying too hard. He presented himself as Prohibition’s answer to Jack Armstrong, the All-American Boy, and sprinkled his speech with exclamations of ‘Gosh!’ and ‘Geet!’ Occasionally he embroidered details . . .”

By early 1936, Ness had parlayed his Capone heroics into a job as the public-safety director of Cleveland, in charge of 2,500 cops, firemen and other city workers. Cleveland was not Chicago, but the city’s neighborhoods were saturated with the numbers racket, prostitution and bootleg liquor. His first priority was reforming the corrupt police department and cracking down on the casinos running under the bribe-infused indifference of local authorities. The gambling dens were banking more than a quarter-million dollars a week at a time when a five-bedroom house in Shaker Heights could be had for \$15,000. New in town, Ness made his mark by staging a raid at one of the fanciest casinos and facing down mob muscle armed with submachine guns.

This time around, the man who named the Untouchables after the vilified Indian caste called his secret squad the “Unknowns.” Besides weeding out crooked cops, he had elaborate plans to crack down on drunk drivers, pickpockets and other civic pests. But just a few months before he took over, two boys walking on Jackass Hill in Kingsbury Run stumbled on the first two bodies, a ghoulish discovery that would change Ness’s life and reputation.

Month by month, the body-parts count mounted. The Mad Butcher was an equal-opportunity murderer—his victims included men and women (two of the latter semi-pro hookers), mostly white, some black. The Cleveland police quickly set up a Butcher Squad of seasoned detectives who rushed to every discovery of bones or decomposing flesh. The coroner pronounced each the work of the same madman, who might have been a surgeon, medical student or slaughterhouse worker. The cops ran down every lead no matter how far-fetched. Given the state of the bodies, only a few could be identified. Detectives even displayed the head of one victim who came to be known as the Tattooed Man and the papers ran a diagram of his body art, but no one came forward to name him.

Mr. Stashower spins a seamless narrative of the grisly crime wave filled with vivid detail, but there’s a problem: Ness turns out to be more of a gimmicky MacGuffin (in Alfred Hitchcock’s term) than a major figure in the hunt for the demon butcher of Kingsbury Run. For all his flamboyance in Chicago, he made himself so inconspicuous in the hunt for the serial killer that the papers began prodding him to act like . . . Eliot Ness.

And when he did, it was a fiasco. A theory took hold that the Butcher was likely based in one of the Hoovervilles slapped together by Depression homeless in Kingsbury Run, and Ness organized a flash raid. The tarpaper shacks were searched, knocked down and set on fire, and the bedraggled men and women hauled off for questioning and to the workhouse. No trace of the killer was found, and Ness was excoriated for his brutal tactics.

All the while, he had a suspect in mind—Francis Sweeney, a disgraced former surgeon who just happened to be the cousin of a powerful Democratic pol, the enemy of Republican Ness and his patron, the mayor. Without due process, Ness sequestered the doctor in a Cleveland hotel suite, grilled him for days and then strapped him to a lie detector for more marathon interrogation, finally releasing him without a confession. Later, the Cuyahoga County sheriff came up with a faux suspect who hanged himself (or was killed) in the county jail.

Ness’s career in Cleveland ended with a two-to-the mystery although the killings ultimately petered out. For all his Goody Shoe rep, he had always been a boozier and a skirt-chaser. Two of his marriages ended in divorce, and he died at 54 in 1957 all but broke after a run of failed business ventures.

Long afterward, a man came forward to say that Sweeney, in 1934, had drugged him in a small Cleveland medical office, and other circumstantial evidence led to the conclusion that the doctor, who had spent his final years in mental hospitals, was in fact the Mad Butcher.

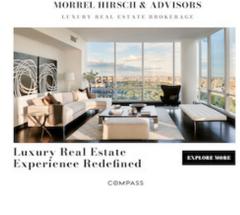
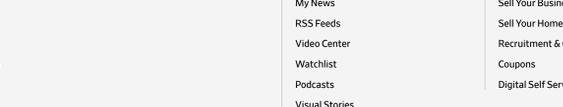
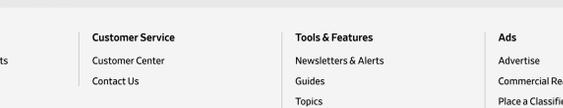
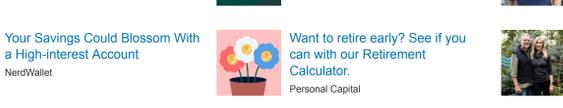
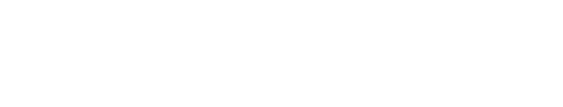
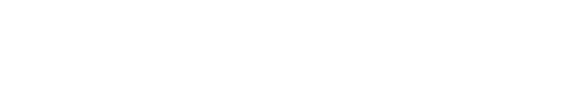
So Ness might well have targeted another major criminal, after all. But unlike the case of Al Capone, for which he got undeserved credit, his only reward this time comes in the final pages of “American Demon.”

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Mr. Kosner is the former editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News.

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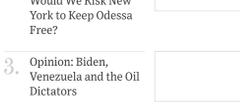
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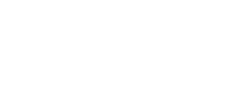
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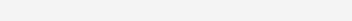
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