

## Dockworkers, Filmmakers and the Transformation of New York's Waterfront

Fisher, James T. *On the Irish Waterfront: The Crusader, the Movie, and the Soul of the Port of New York*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. 2009. Pp. xiv, 370. Cloth \$29.95, paper \$17.95.

reviewed by Louis J. Kern

More than a decade in the making, James Fisher's book presents a thoroughly researched, fully detailed, and balanced assessment of the religion, politics, and culture of the greater New York waterfront – the West Side of Manhattan from the West Village to Chelsea to Hell's Kitchen, and across the Hudson River in New Jersey, Jersey City and Hoboken – in the first decade of the Cold War, 1945-55. As Fisher argues, this period saw a struggle for the "soul of the port" that was fought out among the men on the docks, urban political bosses and Tammany Hall politicians, religious leaders, criminal elements, and corrupt union officials like the ILA's (International Longshoremen's Association) Joseph P. Ryan (1927-54) and Jersey City's mayor (1917-47), Frank Hague.

Against a background of strikes and brutal violence, Fisher highlights the reform efforts of a crusading young Jesuit, John "Pete" Corridan, "the waterfront priest," who exposed the crimes of the waterfront and focused moral indignation on the plight of the longshoreman. His collaborative efforts with newspaper reporters – Malcolm "Mike" Johnson of the New York Sun (that resulted in the Pulitzer-Prize-winning "Crime on the Waterfront" series [1948]), and Bob Greene of the Jersey Journal – and with novelist and screenwriter Budd Schulberg on the screenplay for the multi-Oscar-winning film *On the Waterfront* (d. Elia Kazan, 1954) provided the foundation for both local and national efforts to clean up the waterfront of the nation's largest, busiest, and most lucrative commercial port complex.

Fisher has written a meticulously observed social and cultural history that picks out the threads of the dense tapestry of the ethnic waterfront, grounded in the insularity of the predominantly Irish-American neighborhood-docks culture suspended between the world of the church – the Catholic theology of Mariolatry – and the world of work, characterized by a brutally enforced "code of silence." In the latter arena, the ILA, under "King Joe" Ryan, recruited ex-cons, who served as enforcers to insure member loyalty and to prevent testimony about salary kickbacks, shakedowns, loan sharking, the numbers racket, and the "loading racket" (mandatory "public loading" for all truckers). Silence was insured by ferocious beatings, and not infrequently, murder.

It was into this environment of brutalized and dehumanized dock workers that the thirty-five-year-old John Corridan was impelled in 1946. Assigned to the Xavier Labor School, headed by Father Phil Carey, and appointed to the first official waterfront apostolate, Corridan's response to the labor culture of the port was conditioned by a fortuitous confluence of influences. As a Jesuit, Corridan was a product of a militantly anti-Communist order, closely affiliated with Catholic labor schools and the Catholic Workers movement. His immediate supervisor, Phil Carey, had espoused a "theology of labor" as a vocation of labor: "The priest must sell the idea to the working man that work is a vocation, sanctified. The priest has to present the need of co-operation among workers after the ideal of the Mystical Body of Christ" (74).

Corridan began his initiation in waterfront politics and economics in the wake of the unauthorized strike over limitations of "sling loads" (the allowable weight of cargo net loads) by ILA Local 791 in October 1945. That job action left confusion, frustration, and disorganization in its wake. Corridan also benefitted from the earlier study of labor conditions on the docks in Brooklyn, *The Waterfront Problem* (1938), by parish priest, Edward Swanstrom, that offered a powerful critique of the "shapeup," a traditional hiring practice that insured a cycle of irregular employment, violence, and impoverishment for dock workers. The final element that contributed to Corridan's waterfront vocation was the French worker-priest movement, an offshoot of the Catholic Action movement, in which priests assumed industrial labor roles, like the "docker priest" of Marseilles, Father Jacques Loew, who worked and lived alongside port workers.

While Corridan played a significant role in efforts to reform the waterfront, Fisher's history is revisionist. Corridan was not a leader among the longshoremen or a heroic waterfront priest, but rather an important force in providing first-hand information to the media and reformist organizations about conditions on the waterfront. His contacts on the docks were limited and he was widely distrusted by the rank and file. His 1948 speech, "A Catholic Looks at the Waterfront," delivered in Jersey City, and his article "Longshoreman's Case" in *America* (November 1948)

marked the beginning of a six-year reformist crusade during which he emerged as the dynamic force at the center of a disparate group of civic reformers, investigative reporters, and radio and television commentators. But it was the work of the public hearings conducted by the New York State Crime Commission (NYSCC), and especially the testimony in 1952 of Jersey longshoreman "Tony Mike" DeVincenzo, that finally breached the wall of secrecy on the docks. When the struggle finally reached its peak in the 1953-54 union elections to determine whether the ILA or the AFL would represent NYC dockworkers, Corridan was not directly involved, and was already working with Budd Schulberg on the screenplay for the film.

As Fisher points out, Corridan's knowledge of the waterfront was largely derived from one long-time informant and, at the time of the 1954 union election, his strongest backing (on the anti-ILA side) was from the Jersey longshoremen; he had virtually no support in Manhattan. Essentially, the solidarity of the Irish waterfront remained impermeable: the "code of silence" insured distrust and hostility towards outsiders, contempt for do-gooder reformers, and an inveterate belief in the absolute separation of the worlds of work and faith. As Fisher concludes, it was clear that Corridan "was not a movement figure ... he remained a party of one with a rare gift for mobilizing the passions of others similarly accustomed to working alone, especially writers." He was most effective "where his dock worker solidarity credentials went unchecked" (248).

This was certainly the case with Budd Schulberg, who first became interested in and then was moved to write about the waterfront through his contact with Corridan and one of the latter's primary dock "experts," Arthur Brown. Schulberg produced a film script, "Crime on the Waterfront" in 1951 that became the "Golden Warriors" script in 1953, and finally "On the Waterfront." His vision was increasingly shaped by Corridan, who is depicted in the film as Father Pete Barry, and in the scene "Christ in the Shapeup," entire passages (unattributed) from Corridan's "A Catholic Looks at the Waterfront" are reiterated. Here too, however, Fisher's treatment is revisionist. Many critics, he argues, have overlooked the basic facts behind the film – though the film's ostensible subject is the NYC docks, it was actually shot in Hoboken, and the shapeup hiring system that figures here so prominently was no longer the chief mode of labor procurement on either side of the river by 1950.

Fisher also challenges the ideological interpretations of the film, whether a simplistic Christian redemption reading or a Cold War reading that stressed the roles of ex-Communists Schulberg and Kazan as informers in their HUAC testimony, whose guilt was reflected in the character Terry Malloy in the film. Instead, Fisher argues that the film embodies what he calls "the spiritual front" (276), a precursor to the collaborative regenerative and reformist efforts of liberation theology,

In the end, Fisher's most revisionist conclusion is that the ultimate solution to the problem of the waterfront did not emerge from the longshoremen, the criminal elements, the unions, or the reformers, but from the shippers. In 1956 the first huge container vessels onto which fully loaded truck beds could be driven were introduced, eliminating the need for longshoremen to shift cargo from vessels to trucks. The piers either deteriorated or were converted to recreational or entertainment uses. Enormous new container terminals were built in Newark, Elizabeth, Bayonne, and Staten Island. The days of Port New York were over. It had been necessary, at last, to destroy the port in order to save its soul.

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