



Baby Face Nelson: Portrait of a Public Enemy

Steven Nickel, William J Helmer

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Lester Joseph Gillis -- better known to the public and press of the 1930s as Baby Face Nelson -- was one of a succession of public enemies beginning with John Dillinger and progressing to Bonnie and Clyde, Ma Barker, Machine Gun Kelly, and Pretty Boy Floyd. For decades their stories were largely myths, containing a combination of popular folklore and carefully crafted FBI fables.

In recent years historians have generated a more factual look at the life and times of the various Depression-era desperados. Until now Baby Face Nelson has remained as enigmatic and one-dimensional as he was then, portrayed by J. Edgar Hoover and newsmen as a trigger-happy punk who looked like a choirboy and killed without a conscience. Finally the full story of his short life can be told.

Using new information that comes from the formerly classified files of the FBI, the Nelson who emerges from the pages of *Baby Face Nelson: Portrait of a Public Enemy* is a more paradoxical and interesting figure than one might expect. Obviously addicted to crime in his youth and evidently intoxicated with violence near the end of his life, he came from an ordinary, honest middle-class family. In a surprising departure from the gangster norm, Nelson and his wife remained fiercely devoted to one another, and between holdups they often lived a quiet domestic life with their two children and, at times, Nelson's mother.

The main focus of this biography is on Nelson's remarkable criminal career, from sensational bank robberies and blazing gun battles up to his death at the age of twenty-five. Many misconceptions are corrected and some of the abuses of the FBI are exposed.

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