ForeWord Reviews

Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898

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An attempt to review Gotham in a brief notice is as reckless as presenting the Himalayas in a three-minute, two-slide, one-question lecture. This disciplined yet exuberant narrative from the Dutch purchase of Indian land in the 1620s to Brooklyn's union with New York in 1898 defies assessment in half-dozen summary paragraphs; it calls for the considered opinions of a life-long student of the city, writing at length. Nevertheless, some of the richness and reward of Gotham can be introduced. Edwin Burrows and Mike Wallace are amply endowed with the energy, research strengths, analytical skills, literary abilities and above all the zestful imagination that New York City's fast-moving, exciting story demands. Gotham is monumental but never overwhelming: It is the work of master literary masons. The narrative is Romanesque in its integrity and solidity of structure but reflects a Gothic precision in its detailing. The authors paint a broad canvas, fully accepting that New York City's history cannot be divorced from great national events—the Revolutionary and Civil wars and westward expansion—or from the shaping roles of federal and state legislation; foreign wars; trade and canals, railroads and electrification—and they invariably include concise chronicling and incisive comment on these forces and their effects on New York —"a city of capital, not a capital city."

The patterns of Dutch and English settlement, the threatened survival of a fought-over township of fewer than 5,000 inhabitants, the dependency on imports, the questionable benefits of accepting needy immigrants, the dynamics of governance dictated from overseas, the struggles of populace vs. politicians, of free thought vs. permitted expression, and the stop-and-start growth of a city ever more burdened by its citizens? needs and expectations are powerfully and clearly told, making for a colorful, enthralling narrative. Burrows and Wallace bring the same refreshing style to recounting the steady rise (and frequent crises) of capitalism, catalyst to the city's growth as both marketplace and manufacturing center and motive force behind the building of docks, ships, highways and railroads. They also clearly chart the city's territorial growth; they analyze business and employment practices and the frequent and sometimes deadly conflicts between employers and workers; they highlight the inextinguishable energy of artisans, craftworkers and laborers—male and female—to secure decent wages in bearable environments.

The foregoing are expected topics in New York City's history. In Gotham they form a visible framework. The authors? clear and supple prose brings clarity and strength to their treatment of these basic themes. Their insertion of key data and supporting citations into clean, fast-moving prose is masterful. This is history with a beating heart; the players command the stage, the documentation lurks in the wings.

Where Burrows and Wallace most powerfully seize the reader's imagination is in the vast range of other elements they illuminate in New York City's dramatic story. Among these are the city's changing ethnic makeup, income distribution and related social tensions; the growth of personal wealth (great or moderate) that shaped fashions in homes, luxury goods, diet and entertainment; epidemics, public health; philanthropy; political corruption and hard-won reform; transportation; water supply; policing and prostitution and real or pretended concern for public morals. Racism, anti-semitism and religious persecution are clearly presented. Fashion, theater, literature and poplar entertainment, together with the growing power of an often confrontational press and New York City's national leadership in publishing and intellectual activity receive detailed attention, as do scientific and technological advances.

These themes are far from decorative clothing for a powerful body. Through sharply drawn vignettes and well-chosen direct quotations, we enter the pulsing worlds and intense lives of men and women of every background, rank and calling. Members of the great political, mercantile and landed families rub shoulders with firebrand reformers, earnest philanthropists, religious proselytizers, men and women of letters, theater managers, madams and prostitutes, abortionists, contortionists, extortionists and bullies and bruisers. Most speak with their own voices and speak forcefully. In addition to drawing extensively upon the basic trio of public records, political memoirs and newspaper articles, the authors have skillfully mined the rich ore of personal diaries, particularly those of Philip Hone and George Templeton Strong, both of

such interest as to demand wider availability and larger readership.

Throughout the book the authors clearly present the many contributions of minorities and women in shaping the city—a process that began in Dutch days with both free and enslaved blacks contributing technical skills essential to the city's survival. African-American participation in the Revolutionary and Civil War is traced, as is black leadership in the struggles for emancipation. Similarly, the fortunes of the African Free School, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church and other mutual aid associations are tracked. Hilletje Wilbruch, who ran New Amsterdam's first hospital (1658) and Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell, who two centuries later (1853) was a provider of medical services for needy women, are among the hundreds of their sex whose pioneering work—meritorious or notorious—receives full recognition.

Gotham is certain to explode any comforting pictures of Old New York and its honest burghers: it is an account of a city long dependent on Caribbean trade, its primacy threatened by a burgeoning Philadelphia. The authors depict greed triumphant, good government withheld, monopolies and manipulation dominant, class warfare at its most ferocious, widespread crime and prostitution, and property exploiters and rack-renting landlords bitterly opposing every urban amenity or public benefit. Bribery won political power, political power guaranteed unlimited kickbacks. To quote Lewis Mumford (The Culture of Cities), New York's ruling classes believed in "the exploitation of the proletariat with occasional philanthropy as an insurance policy."

Concurrently, Gotham is the history of human energy, of extraordinary people (Astors, Vanderbilts, Stewarts, Morgans et al.) risking fortunes to create new industries, of visionary "improvers" (DeWitt, Clinton, Cooper, Edison, Waring et al,) and dedicated public benefactors such as John Pintard, John H. Griscom, Olmsted and Vaux, and Andrew Haswell Green. It is also the history of ordinary people, often heroic in standing for principle and beaten and jailed for their courage. Not least, Gotham offers an unrivaled gallery of devious divines, poltroonish politicos, engaging fortune-seekers, mad inventors, eccentrics, corrupt police, cheerful crooks and incorrigible rogues. In their Introduction Burrows and Wallace state that Gotham can be seen at one level as about connections—and in this expansive and unprejudiced text every vignette and fact meaningfully connects.

Scholars may argue the finer points of the authors? weighting and interpreting of a number of political or legal decisions, pedants may find a sprinkling of possible errors, ethnicists may want more on the minority of their choosing, info-addicts will demand a note on Labadists, Walsh's "wretched end," Sir Danvers Osborne's suicide and trampouzing—but no reader will leave Gotham disappointed. This is a handsome book, with clear type on well laid-out pages. Major divisions, chapter heads and subheads are uniformly helpful; the 43-page bibliography fully supports the short-form, back-of-the-book chapter references. The name

index is comprehensive; the subject index is very finely detailed.

Gotham promises to become a classic: it is an essential purchase for any public or academic library—and should be made required reading in the dimly lit interiors of the New York State Legislature and City Hall. For individuals with any interest at all in New York City, this book is an unbeatable investment in knowledge and reward.

Peter Skinner