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**Where was New York born? Between Bunny and Thrumpton**

JAN MORRIS reviews *Gotham: a History of New York City to 1898* by Edwin G. Burrows & Mike Wallace

'Cities of themselves are nothing without an historian,' wrote Washington Irving, only half in irony, and Messrs Burrows and Wallace have lived up to his precept with a vengeance. *Gotham* is only the first part of a projected two -volume history of their city, but it contains almost 1,400 pages, weighs as much as four and three-quarter pots of marmalade on my kitchen scales and is proudly described by its publishers, without any irony at all, as 'a great blockbuster of a book'.

It is certainly that, but, in other respects, it is not everything the book- jacket claims. It is not 'a masterpiece' because it makes no attempt at selection; it just packs everything in. It does not 'read like a fast-paced novel'. It is hardly 'dazzling' or 'mesmerising'. It is an honourable, proud and affectionate record of a remarkable city's development, written diligently and often entertainingly by two indigenous academics, so complete and so magnificently indexed (if unworthily bound) that it will be an indispensable reference work for New York aficionados ever after.

Washington Irving first gave the city its famous nickname, although most British people associate it only with the Batman sagas. He took it from ancient fables concerning Gotham in Nottinghamshire, a village which was legendarily famous both for its fools and for its cunning (and still is, for all I know; it stands on a minor road somewhere between Thrumpton and Bunny). He may have picked the name only in fun, but this book's cornucopia of civic trends, scams, absurdities, triumphs of invention and grand exploits of opportunism show that he perhaps chose better than he knew.

A couple of decades ago, it suddenly occurred to me that New York, generally presented to the world as an acme of modernism, was in many ways downright hoary. *Gotham* confirms the feeling. People have been calling it Old New York for generations and it is indeed a city of venerable traditions and institutions that Burrows and Wallace describe. They begin with the first European arrival (1524) on a shore of miraculous natural fecundity, 'curiously bedecked with Roses' and inhabited by a migratory Indian people, the Lenapes, which most of us have never heard of and which was extinct by 1803. They go on to remind us that Columbia University (nee King's College) dates from 1754, the New York Society library from the same year, the New York Fire Brigade from 1794, the New York Historical Society from 1804 and Harpers the publisher from 1817 all institutions thriving and characteristic to this day. There was a book fair in New York in 1802! By 1836 the Astor Hotel had 300 rooms! This is a very elderly city by now and almost nothing that we think of as essentially New York is really very new.

The boom-and-bust exuberance of the place is illustrated time and again in the pages of the book. Grand hostesses (and madames) of long ago are easily recognisable today. The same tycoons come and go. Slums are still slums, saloons are still saloons, businessmen were commuting into Manhattan from Brooklyn Heights in the first years of the nineteenth century. Even in 1855, two out of three adult New Yorkers had been born abroad and it is 160 years since James Gordon Bennett declined to join the Union Club because it would not admit women members.

The political, economic and social progress of New York is, of course, traced in scholarly detail its shifts of nationality from Dutch to British to American, its trade links with the British Empire, the Caribbean and the southern States, the spread of its influence into the American West, its involvement in the Civil and Spanish wars, its riots, its poverty, its racial anxieties. I suspect most readers, however, will most enjoy the book simply by pulling out plums from its immense richness of miscellaneous minutiae. The cast of characters is properly terrific Aaron Burr to 'Boss' Tweed, 'Commodore' Vanderbilt to Matthew Brady, bodysnatchers to black-face minstrels to slaves to whores to con-men (a usage first coined in the 1840s, by the way, to describe the New York scamp William Thompson).

For every sort of curious information sidles out of this enormous compendium. Do you know why indigent immigrants were said to travel by steerage? (They were accommodated all too near the rudders.) Or why publishers issue a spring list? (Because in spring the Erie Canal unfroze and book distributions could be resumed.) Or how Tammany Hall began? (It was a patriotic society named for a mythical Indian chief, Tamamend, supposed to have created the Niagara Falls.) And would you have guessed in a month of Sundays that New York merchants used to export ginseng to China? (It grew wild in the backwoods of Pennsylvania.) What a city it is that can give rise to such a varied range of references, surprises and emotions. Almost from the beginning, it seems, New York emanated a particular air of excitement variously squalid, brilliant, repellent and inspiring. It was love-hated always and its special sense of fizz and energy was soon seen as something unique among the nations.

Herman Melville, who eventually grew to detest it, nevertheless wished to God Shakespeare could have walked down Broadway, and even Ralph Waldo Emerson, that rhapsodist of nature, thought that for his next transmigration he might 'choose New York'.

The vividly American allure of New York reached out across the continents long before Hollywood was born. About the time when this grand volume ends, a copy of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, with its ecstatic paeans to Manhattan, fell into the hands of my grandfather far away in rural Monmouthshire. Nowhere could be much remoter from the rush, the rumble, the risk and the thrill of the great city across the ocean Whitman's flickers of black and clefts of streets and porpoise-backs of omnibuses! Yet even there, beside the sweet and timeless Wye, the glamour of the distant prodigy seized him and the seducing notion of New York stirred his heart. He cherished *Leaves of Grass* until the day he died, passed both book and seduction down to me and is today doubtless happily

dipping into Burrows and Wallace in that even greater Gotham beyond the skies.

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