

Sui Generis

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Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace. *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998. xxiv + 1383 pp. Maps, plans, illustrations, references, bibliography, and indices. \$49.95.

It has been quite a while since a complete history of a single American city has been the subject of serious scholarship. Historians' reluctance to span the entire existence of a city is understandable given the risk of losing any focus beyond the mere passage of time, or worse, reification--a city grows, dominates, rivals, and so forth. Then too, there is the morphological issue. What, exactly, is a city when considered as something other than a backdrop for activity--the sum of its buildings and infrastructure? a particular urban type? Even if all these difficulties are resolved, current scholarly concern for comparative analysis will not have been met.

In recent decades, therefore, historians have addressed specific urban topics usually within fairly restricted time periods that mesh with the accepted durations of political and economic history. In so doing they have revived urban history. Traditional subjects have been explored from innovative perspectives, new subjects have appeared. New York City looms large in this endeavor, witness the forty-two-page list of recent works in *Gotham*.

Burrows and Wallace acknowledge their debt to these historians, stating that their task lay in making connections among these varied perspectives. If *Gotham* were only a solid synthesis, it would be quite an achievement. But it is more than that. New York City in their vivid, superbly crafted prose becomes intelligible across two centuries and more as it shaped and was shaped by peoples' beliefs and actions. That dialectic between a place and its people creates the temporal and structural dimensions of *Gotham*. In his introduction, Mike Wallace outlines their innovative mode of analysis which represents a solid contribution to urban theory. The book, like the place, is *sui generis*.

Virtually no one in this century has made a serious attempt to do some-thing similar. Perhaps their closest comrades-in-arms are Carl Bridenbaugh, Gary B. Nash and, at a certain remove, Louis Mumford.¹ A brief examination of how each built his scaffolding sets the structure of *Gotham* in relief.
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Bridenbaugh seems to have given little thought to the question of frame, taking the definition of development for granted, and pouring a wealth of information into prefabricated molds. Despite his encyclopedic knowledge of the Americas, despite a world view worthy of Immanuel Wallerstein and a sensitivity to geographical hierarchies, *Cities in the Wilderness* and *Cities in Revolt* seem built from details. "[T]he founding process occurred at a time when western Europe, under Dutch and English leadership, was gradually outgrowing and casting off the limitations of medieval feudal economy . . . [towns] grew to maturity in the era of world expansion attending the emergence of modern capitalism."

² By 1742, three sections had appeared in British America, urban along the seaboard, agricultural countryside, and backcountry. Thereafter, "cities came to dominate the other two by means of their particular form of urban imperialism."³

Bridenbaugh's organizational scheme, however, turns its back on those perspectives and seems drawn from a standard economic textbook for undergraduates. Development occurs in a regular and accelerating manner, his durations based upon its stages. Hindrances to growth become the convenient exogenous factors. With development came attendant social difficulties. "When we

consider American urban society, apart from its economic aspects, we find it characterized by certain problems affecting it as a unit, and with which the unit had to deal." ⁴ Bridenbaugh's works are not descriptive. Rather, an anachronistic method of organization made them seem so.

Wallace also stresses the importance of the larger world to New York City history, but in a fundamentally different manner. The city's evolving connections with the world do not determine its history, but provide "the context within which the men and women of New York, in conflict and compromise, repeatedly reshaped their city" (p. xvii). His durations frame particular periods of development, but Wallace is attentive to contemporaries pondering change. Whereas Bridenbaugh might have seen New York's emergence as a de facto capital in the nineteenth century as another instance of "urban imperialism," Wallace, having addressed the economic implications, pinpoints the change in the cityscape's new national meanings. These are "reflected in the accepted custom of identifying points in the landscape with national functions," Wall Street and capital, Ellis Island and labor, Fifth Avenue and social trends (p. xviii). However stable its physical elements, in other words, a city's material identity is historically contingent. Here, Wallace gives us a first glimpse of his innovative approach to morphology.

There are parallels with Gary B. Nash in *The Urban Crucible*. Seeking to understand what turned towns into "crucibles of revolutionary activity," Nash takes "social morphology" as his guide. He is attentive to the ways "people worked, lived and perceived change going on about them, how class [End Page 181] relations shifted, and how political consciousness grew, especially among the laboring classes . . . people who suffered the unequal effects of eighteenth-century change." Bridenbaugh's "problems" are not Nash's givens, nor were they to contemporaries. Nash stresses "evolving relations among different groups of urban people who were subject to historically rooted changes that may have been as perplexingly intricate to them as they have been to historians since." *The Urban Crucible* has rendered them far less perplexing thanks to Nash's skillful construction of social morphologies. As a result, although the subject is political economy in its broadest sense, his towns come alive as fields of historical action in ways they fail to do under Bridenbaugh's pen. Given his objective, had Nash addressed the evolving physical character of the towns, it would have seemed a digression. For Wallace and Burrows, on the other hand, that issue must be, and is, central. ⁵

Nash also faced a lesser challenge than the authors of *Gotham* in defining durations. His succinctly stated question frames the temporal rhythms. They are not teleological, as with Bridenbaugh, but, rather, dialectic. Growth and War (1690-1740) are followed by Conflict and Revolution (1740-1776). Mike Wallace, careful student of public history, knows his elusive objective not only evolves across time, but is multiple at any given moment. He orchestrates durations accordingly.

Wallace defines three sorts of long durations or "framing forces," sometimes but not always coinciding. The first places New York in global perspective, beginning with the important point that the Lenapes were brought into European trading circuits long before New Amsterdam saw the light of day. It ends in the late twentieth century, when a more "decentered transnational capitalism" challenges New York's former preeminence, leaving it nonetheless as "one of a handful of world cities" (p. xxiii).

The second situates New York with respect to the rest of the continent, "a more bell-shaped trajectory" beginning with a "tiny New Amsterdam as peripheral to the continent as to the planet" (p. xxiii). It ends with the Cold War, military Washington and commercial New York in partnership. But as Washington sped the transfer of wealth and the arms economy bypassed New York, the city lost industrial jobs. The result was the 1960s urban crisis, the 1970s "so-called" fiscal crisis, and the 1980s ascendancy of "Sunbelt/Greenbelt constituencies" (p. xxiv).

The third framing force, "Municipal Remakings," is particularly innovative. It is contingent upon the first two as they "generated wealth for collective endeavor," but it also comes to grips with the diverse ways people invested meaning in the place, and acted upon what they understood (pp. xvi-xx). "Municipal Remakings" brings us to ground zero, and in it lies the substance of the book. Wallace then arrives at the core of the issue by pointing [End Page 182] out that on a year-to-year basis, New Yorkers confronted "peaks of prosperity with real troughs of hard times that dominated the experience of everyday life" (p. xxvi). He summarizes what this meant for the shaping of the cityscape. Building sprees "were separated enough in time that new cultural fashions, technologies and construction practices made each boom completely different . . . [one can] read the cityscape as an archeologist deciphering stacked layers of earth." Here one also begins to get a taste of vivid and apt descriptions, the World Trade Center becoming the "berserk apotheosis" of the modernist movement (pp. xv-xxii, xxii).

Wallace's orchestration of the cityscape is an achievement of no small magnitude, standing in marked contrast to Louis Mumford's approach, most notably in *The City in History*. Mumford constructed urban

types, each with distinct morphological properties, derived from the imprint of power. However trenchant the analysis of each type, Mumford gives no explanation for change over time or for variation within a given moment. Implicit in the work is a modern bias inherent in the comparative approach which seeks similarities and hierarchies based upon them. In perhaps the most telling criticism of Mumford's method, Asa Briggs, rejecting the "Coketown" type, pointed out that what industrialization in fact did to cities was to differentiate them. ⁶

What must a Mumfordian comparison eliminate or ignore in an individual city in order to seem plausible? Ironically, in its sole excursion onto this slippery terrain, *Gotham* provides an answer. As New York lost its status of political capital, the United States would have two centers—one the seat of government, the other, of the market. "This separation of powers . . . had no parallel in the Western world. London, Paris, Amsterdam, Berlin, Vienna, Rome, Madrid, Lisbon—these were capitals in the fullest sense of the word, hubs of national politics, business and culture" (p. 306). Well, Amsterdam is not the capital of the Netherlands; Berlin and Rome were cities in search of a country before 1870; Paris and Madrid, indeed political capitals, faced powerful economic competition from other cities in their realms. Vienna perhaps was such a capital, although its economy depended virtually exclusively on local demand, and it was not the hub of a nation before the twentieth century. Only Lisbon and London fill the bill.

The introduction, however, gives no hint of Mumfordian analysis. Instead, Wallace renews our acquaintance with an older urban theory which stressed what was unique to each city on the premise that in the town's distinctiveness lay its identity. ⁷ The introduction opens with New York's several myths of origins. The little English town whose residents successfully evaded even the possibility of tax collection gave New York its enduring alias, Gotham. Then there is the Dutch "purchase" of Manhattan. Together they establish New York as a "city of tricksters," deriving their legendary quality from the "host [End Page 183] of meanings" attached to them over the years. The island became a piece of property acquired by fooling the Lenapes (who did not consider it "property") so that "deal driving, sharp practice and money-making lie somewhere near the core of New York's genetic material." The purchase also "proclaims a city whose acquisition was based not on conquest but on contract" (pp. xix-xxi). New York became a great commercial center, as did several other American cities. It differed from them because of its importance, to be sure, but also, as the legends suggest, because New Yorkers saw this fact, for better or worse, as the core of the city's identity.

This dialogue between what is and what is seen to be pervades the text. New Yorkers invented various presents, at first in distinction to pasts deemed less civilized. Then came presents supposedly based on observation, notably of crowds. "'Crowd' had long been disturbingly interchangeable with 'mob,' but now [mid nineteenth century] it evoked something benign: a vibrant street life, an exciting tempo, a flood of sensation" (p. 692). But crowds conferred anonymity, newly-sensed as a social danger, a harbinger of reinventing the past once again. The lost era, never situated in real time, was surely more gentle and civilized. "This wave of looking backward also spurred historical scholarship" (p. 695). Mary Louise Booth, commissioned to write the century's first comprehensive history of the city in 1859, sought to undermine New Englanders' portrayal of New Yorkers as "crassly commercial." She shared that aim with the guide books, portraying the place as "civic spirited, filled with noble vistas" (p. 696). Here, the invented past and present converged, but ran counter to the new sensationalist depictions. These created a present for "those in the middle ground . . . addressed but not described, and the result was a chiaroscuro portrait of people of light and darkness, resembling the way radiance from gas-lit street lamps were swallowed up by surrounding blackness" (p. 699).

Gotham provides no formula of universal applicability but, rather, an approach drawn from the subject itself. If there is any comparative perspective, it lies in the "past as prologue," a history "respectful of human affairs' complexity and contiguity [which provides] well-grounded insights into the current situation." Past actions bequeath "today's constraints and possibilities . . . the past flows powerfully through the present . . . we think the more we know about the city's past the more we will care about its future" (p. xxiv).

In a word, we finally have an answer to Eric Lampard's deceptively simple challenge. If urban history is to advance, he insisted, then scholars must go beyond simply demonstrating that a city is the product of larger social forces. Its identity, he suggested, lies in its specific responses to those forces. ⁸

The first volume of *Gotham* contains 1,236 pages of text, liberally sprinkled with maps, plans, and illustrations, all of which, oh miracle, are legible. References take up 23 pages, followed by 42 more of bibliography, a 13-page [End Page 184] index of names, and 54 more of subject index. Edwin Burrows wrote the first 408 pages, ranging from Lenape Country as it entered European circuits circa 1500 through the War of 1812. Mike Wallace wrote the remainder. The transition is seamless, the mark of a true collaborative effort. *Gotham* is that *rara avis* that both addresses a large readership and

aims to be a guide for historians. Its success is due less to the selection of materials than to their organization.

Burrows is particularly skilled at describing the larger, often international, context succinctly, then pinpointing its relevance to New York. On the quality of life in New Amsterdam: "The upsurge of immigration to New Netherlands during the mid-1650s and early 1660s was accompanied by the exuberant revival of holidays long associated with popular culture in Europe" (p. 53). The revival emerged from a series of compromises at home, between "religious and secular imperatives, Calvinism and humanism, sobriety and festivity." The unbending Stuyvesant, however, would have none of it, a setting for novel and intense conflict, if ever there was one. On long-term consequences of the War for Independence: The outbreak of fighting dampened British radical enthusiasm for America. "Not for another generation, by which time, the world had greatly changed, would British and American radicals come within hailing distance of one another" (p. 244).

A good deal of thought has gone into temporal scale. Important breaks in the city's history are sometimes compressed into brief day-by-day chronicles in the best journalistic tradition. That device, especially with the British evacuation of New York and the onset of the 1837 Panic, produces a vivid overview of their significance to contemporaries. Conversely, the sea changes of less than a decade preceding the 1837 Panic receive more pages of text than any other similar timespan.

In chapter 31 Wallace begins by laying the bases of new working-class struggles and underscores the importance of the new popular press. Temperance and evangelism follow, with a pass by diet reform, and a superb section on prostitution. Chapter 33 chronicles the scapegoating of Irish Catholics and African Americans, and their responses to it, as with the rise of "defensive ethnic separation." African Americans had to contend not only with racism but also slavecatchers who infiltrated the city. The final two chapters are point and counterpoint, standing in as brutal contrast as do the guidebooks and sensationalist literature. The first gives us not simply the greatly diversified ways to make money, but also the novel and staggering amounts of wealth in some hands, and the uses to which it was put, notably, in reshaping the landscape. The counterpoint is entitled "Filth, Fever, Water, Fire." The expansion of elite territory contrasts with the compression of the poor into "ever more dilapidated quarters" (p. 587). Pigs made inroads into the growing heaps of excrement in the street, "but what goes in must come out, [End Page 185] and the porkers added their own contribution to the vile stew" (p. 588). Does it come as a surprise that night soil disposal was "one of the few jobs reserved exclusively for blacks" (p. 588)?

With the 1833-34 cholera epidemics, "[f]or some, the poor swam into focus for the first time. . . . The immigrant poor, who had fared worst, came in for the greatest opprobrium" (pp. 591, 593). The chapter ends with its own counterpoint. The great fire of 1835 made possible, with astonishing rapidity, the creation of a far grander business district, now a financial center virtually exclusively. The dry-goods trade and retail shops relocated. Broadway became a business district in its own right, where "publishers, law firms and newspapers now clustered." This in turn "touched off a pell-mell flight of the wealthy" (p. 600). The great change for the city's poor was little more than the absence of cholera. But the elite had once again reshaped New York in its own interests, shrinking spaces for the poor still further.

In these chapters lie the germs of the contradictions, conflicts, and fragile consensuses that continue to haunt present-day New York. They are the capstones of *Gotham*.

Other outstanding analyses include a discussion of "homosocial" and erotic New York, background for a discussion of the lives of women from all social backgrounds. As the country moved toward Civil War, Wallace places Black Republicans in the foreground of his analysis of the impact on New York. The making of the middle class as it came to recognize itself through similar work and leisure experiences, and through granting itself something of a monopoly on the cultivated life, is the skillfully-rendered subject of Chapter 55. Throughout the volume the physical city stays in the foreground, sometimes becoming the subject in its own right, as in Chapter 24, more often as it shaped New Yorkers' lives (see, in particular, pp. 666-68, 718-20, 727-28, 745-48).

The text abounds with anecdotes, the mark of a work meant for a large audience, to be sure, but in this case part and parcel of the theoretical approach. Extracted from the text and printed apart, they would be sufficient to denote singular New York, as, for example:

With the distinction between small master and journeymen fast disintegrating, New York's working people began, as early as 1817, to employ a new term to describe their entrepreneurial employers: "boss," derived from *baas*, the Dutch word for master. (p. 516)

Using that term "sharply differentiated their condition from that of slaves" (pp. 553-54). The word shoddy was coined by Brooks Brothers to describe ersatz cloth made from shredded rags rolled, glued, and smoothed. This was the material the firm used to fill military contracts for Civil War uniforms (p. 875). The red-light district known as the Tenderloin got its name from a police [End Page 186] captain relishing the bribes he would receive there. Chuck steak had been his usual fare, but "now I'm going to have a bit of tenderloin" (p. 959).

Inevitably, there are a number of errors, two of which I will mention here. Black people in Barbados are said to have numbered 6,000 in 1645 and 82,000 in 1667 (p. 48). The island's first census in 1673 gives 33,184. The figure for 1645 is closer, probably based on Ligon's history, which gives 5,680 people in 1645. The reference for the three-or-so pages of text where the figures appear lists forty historians, as elsewhere, by last name and date of relevant publication, but, of course, no page numbers. One of the forty, Richard Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves* (1972), would have provided the correct figures (pp. 75, 87).

Similarly, the number of black people in New York City as of 1680 is greatly exaggerated: 1,600 (p. 88). The first provincial census, in 1698, put the number in the city at 700. Again, one of the twenty historians listed as reference for this two-page section, Joyce Goodfriend, *Before the Melting Pot* (1992) has the correct figures (p. 112).

In neither reference is it clear where the authors may have drawn the 1667 and 1680 estimates. For someone reasonably familiar with the subject matter, this organization of references and the necessity to plough through the 42-page bibliography is a minor nuisance. It does, however, limit the potential of *Gotham* for classroom use.

That said, do lose yourself in the labyrinths of *Gotham*.

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Notes

1. Carl Bridenbaugh, *Cities in the Wilderness* (1938; 1964) and *Cities in Revolt* (1955; 1971); Gary B. Nash, *The Urban Crucible* (1979); Lewis Mumford, *The City in History* (1961). Edward M. Spann gives us total New York in a restricted period of time in *The New Metropolis. New York City, 1840-1857* (1981). Sam Bass Warner presents Philadelphia in depth during three periods of time separated by half-centuries in *The Private City* (1971).

2. Bridenbaugh, *Cities in the Wilderness*, 467.

3. Bridenbaugh, *Cities in Revolt*, 418.

4. *Ibid.*, 470.

5. Nash, *The Urban Crucible*, viii, vii-ix, xi.

6. Asa Briggs, *Victorian Cities* (1963; 1970), 33-34. Donald J. Olsen gives a vigorous antidote to Mumford in *The City as a Work of Art. London Paris Vienna* (1986), ix, 9-85.

7. Chiara Frugoni, *A Distant City. Images of Urban Experience in the Medieval World*, trans. William McCraig (1991), 30-81; Peter Borsay, *The English Urban Renaissance, Culture and Society in the Provincial Town, 1660-1770* (1989), 80-113; Bernard Lepetit, *Les Villes dans la France Moderne (1740-1840)* (1988), 52-81; Jeanne Chase, "New York City Reinventata: Utile Reflessioni su un Ordine in Continuo Evolversi" in *La Città e le Sue Storie*, ed. Carlo Olmo and Bernard Lepetit (1995), 187-222; Amy Gilman, "Edgar Allan Poe Detecting the City" in *The Mythmaking Frame of Mind: Social Imagination and American Culture*, ed. James Gilbert et al. (1993), 71-90.

8. Eric E. Lampard, "The History of Cities in Economically Advanced Areas" in *Regional Development and Planning*, ed. John Friedman and William Alonzo (1964), 324. See also Jan de Vries, *European Urbanization 1500-1800* (1984), 3-13, 254-66.