

officials and teachers mustered their pupils outside, made sure everyone was lined up by class and wearing protective plastic helmets and coats against the cold, and marched them toward a traffic island. This would have gotten them safely out of the way if the school had been on fire, but was no protection whatever against a wave of water, crushed houses, and uprooted trees that, at its peak, was the height of an 11-story building. Several boys urged their teachers that they all run up the nearby hill, and started to do so. They were called back and silenced. These children, and their classmates, died of obedience.

Metropolis Rising

How the Big Apple took its place among the world's great cities

Review by Brooke Kroeger

**GREATER GOTHAM:
A History of New York City From 1898 to 1919**
BY MIKE WALLACE
Oxford University Press, 1,196 pp., \$45

MIKE WALLACE'S *Greater Gotham* is a brightly hued kaleidoscope of themes, facts, stories, and characters. Every turn of its cylinder rearranges the shiny bits into new configurations, fresh ways to consider the blink-of-an-eye transformation of New York City into an "imperial metropolis," "the de facto seat of America's budding empire."

Wallace, a distinguished professor at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice and founder of the Gotham Center for New York City History, won the 1999 Pulitzer Prize for History for his previous work, *Gotham*, co-authored with Edwin G. Burrows. In 1,424 pages of prodigious detail, the two New York historians chronicled the thousands of years from the Ice Age to the threshold

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of Wallace's new solo effort. *Greater Gotham* consumes nearly as much space to unfurl a mere 21 years of the city's history, from 1898 to 1919, a period of rapid consolidation and conglomeration that reverberated through every aspect of social, economic, and cultural life.

For the earlier work, Wallace and Burrows set out to consider "each moment on its own terms, respecting its uniqueness." They endeavored to remain "mostly in their 'now'" of the contemporaries whose stories they chose to relate. In this new work, Wallace has staked out themes, primary among them how the city's corporate elite shaped and executed their vision of an efficient, beautiful metropolis that was ripe for investment. Among those he cites are John D. Rockefeller (oil), Henry Osborne Havemeyer (sugar), James Buchanan Duke (tobacco), Andrew Carnegie (steel), and their surrogates, as well as the bankers J. Pierpont Morgan, Jacob Schiff, and August Belmont. "Applying the methods and ideology of consolidation," Wallace writes, "they would work to reshape its borders, rationalize its transport and life-support systems, and remodel its cultural and political institutions."

The objective of these men was primacy for New York itself as a city, for New York in the eyes of the country, and for this great new actor on the world stage. To do this, they overcame self-defeating rivalries and competition, upgraded the ailing port, cleaned up waterway pollution, built new infrastructure. They improved connections to the rest of the continent and across the oceans and borders. They addressed issues of common concern, such as crime and education, and tackled the housing crisis wrought by waves of arriving immigrants. They identified locations for new industries and improved the sources of water, power, and food. They funded or encouraged "urban embellishments," from parks to museums to venues for all manner of entertainment, high and low. They attempted, with mixed results, to overpower the corrupt politicians of the Tammany machine and to stave off challenges to New York's growing stature from cities with similar ambitions.

All of this, of course, invited a range of countervailing forces, from union organizers to suffragists to tenant activists, muckraking journalists, Ash Can artists, “Harlem-based opponents of racism, and Greenwich Village-based cultural and sexual radicals.” All these and so many others find ample place in the story alongside the clubs, societies, settlement houses, and other civic, social, and charitable organizations, institutes, and cultural establishments that emerged to meet the panoply of disparate wants, persuasions, and needs.

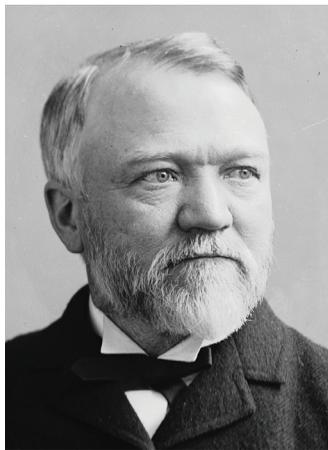
Altitude is Wallace’s metaphor for the vantage points from which he surveys these two

economy experienced booms and busts.

Finally, at ground level, Wallace regales his readers with an extraordinary parade of the period’s standout figures. Scores of them, the well-remembered and the long-forgotten, make cameo appearances, even Ota Benga, outrageously engaged at the Bronx Zoo. Along with the major

industrialists and bankers, dozens more take star turns as recurring characters, including statesman Elihu Root, Mayor John Purroy

New York’s corporate and political elite included such icons as (from left) John D. Rockefeller, Andrew Carnegie, and John Purroy Mitchel.



crucial decades in the city’s development. As if from a satellite, he considers New York’s role in the changing global scheme; from a jetliner, he sees the relationship of city and country to New York’s emergence as the unofficial capital of the United States. At helicopter height, he follows the city’s economy as it adapted to national and international changes and the financial sector’s rise to preeminence. He reviews the myriad construction projects—immigrant housing, sky-scraping office buildings, the ports—and how they elevated the field of real estate development. With a bird’s-eye view, he traces the undulating quality of city life as the

Wallace regales his readers with an extraordinary parade of standout figures—scores of them, the well remembered and the long forgotten.

Mitchel, critic Herbert Croly, W. E. B. Du Bois, the educator and politician Seth Low, social and political reformer Florence Kelley, financier and philanthropist George F. Baker, attorney Samuel Untermyer, newspaper editor and socialist Abra-

ham Cahan, and architect Stanford White.

What comes through most powerfully is how the corporate and banking elite of the era took on as their personal province the refashioning of Gotham into “a colossal fact,” “a City Gigantic.” Wallace notes that the same members of the business elite who were most responsible for consolidating the five boroughs into the “second-

largest city on earth” guided the major industrial and financial incorporations and expansions of the era. That in turn refashioned the national economy and reconstituted U.S. relations with the rest of the world.

As a class, they also claimed from their forebears—the largely WASP and similarly proprietary 19th-century merchants and landowners who had invested so heavily in the city’s development in the previous generation—the right of what Wallace calls “cultural primogeniture.” The successor group, despite whatever differences they may have had in style and interests, shared a sense of themselves as “*progressive*, agents of a new and higher form of civilization,” Wallace writes, “one that required rising above the competitive scramble of the marketplace and attaining the lofty altitude from which the future could be actively planned, not passively endured. Being capitalists, they were pursuing *private* profit, not the *common* wealth, but many were convinced of their program’s social utility and believed the greater good would come wagging along behind it.” The city’s cultural consolidation took longer than the business and infrastructure initiatives, he explains, because Gotham’s upper class was so divided into “sets,” among them, sophisticates, literary figures, philanthropists, new millionaires, and those with more “Knickerbocker, or other highly respectable ancestors,” than wealth.

Did this greater metropolis work? The answer, Wallace reports, depends on “which New York you looked at ... and what criteria for success was applied.” For in the same period arrived masses of poor and working-class immigrants from across greater Europe, and from Central and South America, many of whom became the great city’s builders, its sandhogs, and steelworkers. They brought with them a different set of concerns than those of the corporate elite and sometimes radically different notions of how a great city should function. The conflicts provide another rich source of fascination.

Wallace readily acknowledges that his book is, at bottom, a monster synthesis of “thousands

of studies made by myriad specialists who in the last generation have rewritten the city’s history.” Its pitfalls are thus the coin flip of its manifold gifts. One can quibble with the author’s choices of whom or what to feature most prominently or at all. Theodore Dreiser and Edith Wharton, for example, are the only literary figures of the day who rate their own break-out sections. And in cases where Wallace cites several conflicting sources of information on a given topic, the book’s abbreviated reference section does not say whose scholarship he has most heavily relied on—or whose he has discounted—or why he made that choice. But quibbles these are. Use the book as an almanac or read it straight through for its many pleasures. The kaleidoscope dazzles with every move of the hand.

Antiquarian Dreams

Sometimes it’s okay to judge history by its cover

Review by Helen Hazen

**MEETINGS WITH REMARKABLE MANUSCRIPTS:
Twelve Journeys into the Medieval World**
BY CHRISTOPHER DE HAMEL
Penguin Press, 632 pp., \$45

CHRISTOPHER DE HAMEL is technically a paleographer, someone who studies ancient forms of writing, but that title is woefully inadequate to describe his erudition. He is better referred to as a world-renowned expert on medieval manuscripts, but even that is insufficient. Take this by way of example: when de Hamel puts his hands on the beautiful *Codex Amiatinus*, the earliest known copy of the Latin Vulgate version of the Catholic Bible (housed in a museum in Florence, and

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