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Reviews in American History, Volume 46, Number 3, September 2018, pp. 471-475 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/rah.2018.0071>



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ANOTHER BITE AT THE BIG APPLE

Glenn C. Altschuler

Mike Wallace. *Greater Gotham: A History of New York City from 1898 to 1919.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. 1196 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, and index. \$45.

Sequels are rarely as good as, and even more infrequently better than, the original. There are, however, some notable exceptions. Among movies, *Godfather II* sits on top of a very short list of critically acclaimed second acts. In American history, Perry Miller's landmark volume in intellectual history, *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* (1953) followed his immensely influential *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (1939). David Brion Davis's masterful *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* (1975) was preceded by the brilliant *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (1966). And, for good measure, Miller and Davis also produced memorable third volumes.

Extraordinarily distinguished in its own right, *Greater Gotham* joins this list of excellent and enduring sequels. In its predecessor, *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898* (1998), Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace accomplished something that Jeanne Chase, writing in *Reviews in American History*, claimed no one had seriously attempted in a century: provide a comprehensive, richly detailed, eminently readable, economic, social, cultural, and political history of New York, covering 250 years, highlighting "contradictions, conflicts, and consensuses." Chase urged historians to lose themselves in "the labyrinths of *Gotham*." They did. Widely regarded as "definitive," *Gotham* was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in History.

In *Greater Gotham*, a long book, Mike Wallace, the sole author, (Burrows died in May, 2018) covers a relatively short time period. The volume opens in 1898, with a newly consolidated New York, consisting of Manhattan, Brooklyn, the Bronx, Queens, and Staten Island, and a population twice as large as any other city in the United States. Wallace considers the implications of the creation of a "super city" from the perspective of corporate elites (financiers, manufacturers, merchants, landowners, and lawyers) who promoted the grand merger; and native-born workers and immigrants, millions of whom flocked to New York at the turn of the twentieth century.

The overwhelmingly Anglo-Protestant, cohesive and powerful corporate elite, Wallace points out, sought to preside over the city's physical, economic, social and cultural development through a reconstruction of capitalism that replaced competition with consolidation. Many less affluent citizens, Wallace reminds us, had distinctly different ideas about how to rearrange and run New York, focusing less on efficiency and profit, and more on economic and social justice and equality.

Four sections follow "Consolidation and Competition." "Construction and Connection" examines the built environment: skyscrapers, transportation infrastructure, townhouses and tenements, industrial and commercial complexes. "Cultures" surveys high and middle brow institutions (universities, zoos, libraries, theaters, symphony and opera houses), show business, sports, and "the staging" of ethnicity and race. "Confrontations" investigates the aims and impact of progressives, transgressors (gangsters, gamblers, prostitutes, sellers and consumers of alcohol and drugs), civil rights and labor activists, gender benders, socialists, and modernists. *Greater Gotham* concludes with a section on World War I and its immediate aftermath in New York.

Reprising the approach taken in *Gotham*, Wallace does not offer a grand (or revisionist) synthesis of urban history or theory. Instead, he surveys the cityscape from multiple vantage points. Taking a global perspective, he describes the spread of finance capitalism and corporations based in Gotham as the leading edge of the rise of the United States as a world power. A second angle of vision tracks the emergence of New York as the *de facto* nation's capital in politics, finance, fashion, entertainment, and advertising. A third analytical lens examines changes in the macroeconomy of the city in, for example, the building trades, real estate, oil and sugar refining, and shipping. Wallace's fourth point of view gauges the responses to alternating periods of prosperity, panic, and depression. A final perspective takes readers to the streets of New York to meet "hundreds of individuals and innumerable varieties of Gothamites" (p. xxii).

Greater Gotham pulsates with the energy and enterprise of New Yorkers and the sights, sounds, and smells of New York. Weighing in at 1,196 pages, the volume is filled to overflowing with information, much of which will be new even to specialists. It is a delight to read even the most pungent sections.

Consider, to cite but one example, Wallace's account of garbage and sewage disposal. While ashes were hauled to landfills and dry refuse incinerated, garbage (animal and vegetable refuse), which reached 220 tons a day in winter and 1100 tons in the summer heat in Manhattan alone, was recycled. Stewed and cooked in digesters located in a plant on Barren Island, by 500 black, Irish, Italian and Polish workers, the garbage was reduced to oil, grease and fertilizer worth \$10 million a year. Sewage, we learn, had been dumped in the harbor, where filth and sludge rose to the surface and attached itself to young

children out for a swim at public beaches. With the introduction of wastewater treatment plants, Wallace indicates, New York in the 1910s became one of the healthiest major cities in the United States.

Abundantly detailed, capacious, comprehensive, and destined, like *Gotham*, to be deemed definitive, *Greater Gotham* will, no doubt, attract more than a few fact-checkers and critics who will identify material they believe should have been included or excluded, or disagree with interpretations embedded in the narrative.

A few examples. On occasion, Wallace may well pay insufficient attention to the outer boroughs. For example, he does not address conflicts among residents about whether the future lay with urbanization or suburbanization. Wallace's explanation for why the skyscraper boom took hold in New York and not Chicago, Philadelphia, or Boston—"the culture and law of limitlessness [in New York] – the absolute right of property owners to do as they pleased with their property (barring noxious or dangerous uses) – proved unbroachable"—seems facile (p. 159). He also lays out the defense of "honest graft" advanced by Plunkitt of Tammany Hall but does not assess the impact on the citizens of New York of this method of funding public buildings and infrastructure.

Perhaps more problematically, Wallace gives too much credit to the machinations of Theodore Roosevelt in thwarting the gubernatorial aspirations of William Randolph Hearst in 1906. Plotting "every step" of Charles Evans Hughes's campaign, Wallace writes, President Roosevelt, who feared the working class support the insurgent Democratic candidate was mobilizing, leaked details of Hearst's "disreputable" private life to newspaper editors. He then enlisted his "top gun," U.S. Secretary of State Elihu Root, to denounce Hearst as a demagogue and declare that Roosevelt had had the newspaper magnate in mind when he referred to agitators who inflamed the assassin of William McKinley. "Thrown on the defensive," Wallace maintains, "Hearst was able to do little more than denounce Root as a tool of the corporation. It wasn't enough" (p. 118). Wallace does not examine other factors that may have been more decisive. These criticisms, and the reservations registered by other scholars, will not, I suspect, diminish the acclaim for *Greater Gotham*.

Worth noting is Wallace's skill at organizing and presenting mountains of material in a narrative that supplies the national and international context but keeps New York at center stage. To be sure, Wallace does not always strike the right balance. A section on turn-of-the-century fiction, which argues that the rise of Wall Street generated new subjects and themes, for example, features plot summaries of Upson Sinclair's New York novels, *The Metropolis* (1908) and *The Moneychangers* (also 1908), only to acknowledge that reviewers dismissed the books as incoherent and lifeless, and they failed to attract readers.

Wallace's section on drugs does strike the right balance. He introduces the topic with a brief discussion of the Opium Wars of the mid-nineteenth cen-

ture, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, and a New York State law that made it illegal to operate a venue where opium was sold, given away, or smoked. Organized by tongs, Wallace writes, opium was smuggled into the United States, and "sent to Gotham, c/o some innocuous address, usually a Chinese laundry in lower Manhattan" (p. 612). Once thought exotic and picturesque, opium dens seemed threatening in the 1900s. The hysteria was magnified in 1909, when the body of Elsie Sigel, a nineteen-year-old Christian missionary and the granddaughter of a Civil War general, was found, stuffed in a trunk, at the Eight Avenue apartment of a Chinese male "of Americanized dress and manners" (p. 612). Lynch mobs, Wallace reveals, began to appear at Chinese laundries and chop suey restaurants. In 1909, Congress banned the importation and use of opium other than for medicinal purposes. The law "finished off opium dens," and led users to switch to cocaine and heroin (p. 619).

In fact, Wallace points out, the spread of narcotics in New York and throughout the country is attributable much more to Anglo-Saxon doctors and druggists, who prescribed opium, laudanum, codeine and morphine, for illnesses real and imagined, than to Chinese immigrants. And to pharmaceutical companies like Squibb, founded in Brooklyn in 1858, and Merck, which had manufacturing facilities near Staten Island, and became the largest distributor of drugs in the United States. In 1908, Wallace reports, the thriving black market on Third Avenue between 12th and 16th Street was called "Cocaine Row." By 1919, as many as 90% of the heroin addicts in the United States lived within 180 miles of Manhattan.

At its best, then, *Greater Gotham* establishes the "New Yorkness" of its topics. Around 1900, Wallace maintains, the city became "Art Central." Atop a cluster of institutional tastemakers was the National Academy of Design, whose members taught classes and organized exhibits. With sixty-two art galleries in 1914, more than London and Paris combined, New York laid claim to primacy as an art marketplace. Boasting specialized trade magazines, including *American Art News* and *Art in America*, and art critics in eight metropolitan dailies, Gotham had displaced Philadelphia as the place "where national and international reputations were made" (p. 828).

Although the fledgling NAACP was establishing itself as a national organization, its roots, Wallace points out, were in New York City. When he became director of publicity and research, and editor of *The Crisis*, W.E.B. Du Bois moved to Gotham, which became the NAACP's headquarters. At least fifteen of the thirty-member executive committee, moreover, were required to live in New York. Although New York's corporate elite did not support the NAACP, Wallace writes, the city could legitimately claim to rival Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee "as the center of the country's organized black movement" (p. 807).

In an article published in *Everybody* magazine in 1916, Wallace tells us, the newspaper columnist and wit Franklin P. Adams derided tourists who

roamed around midtown, attended a play, an opera, a lobster house, and a cabaret. These visitors, Adams sniffed, had “no right to generalize about New York from a hasty glance at a few New York blocks.” When he gave himself the same assignment, Adams learned a lesson. “I do not know New York,” he acknowledged. “I cannot interpret it. I do not know what its ‘message’ is. New York is too large to know. Too many things are simultaneously true of it.” Cromwell Childe, another Gotham watcher, had much the same view: “New York is now so great that it has become like London; no one knows it completely” (p. 478). Other journalists, in search of New York’s “essence,” its “personality,” Wallace indicates, agreed that it was too varied for a single, simple generalization, and used words like flux, crowds, speed, rude, and cosmopolitan to describe some of the distinctive qualities of their city.

Mike Wallace, no doubt, sees these commentators as kindred spirits. He recognizes, moreover, along with a writer in *Harper’s Monthly* in 1856, that Gotham is “never the same city for a dozen years together” (p. 478). That said, Wallace has written a book, covering two decades, that is large, that contains multitudes, and that captures one of the greatest cities in the world in all its marvelous, monstrous, mundane, and monumental manifestations. Scholars, history buffs, and anyone interested in The Big Apple, can only hope that Wallace is well along on volume three.

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