

EDWIN G. BURROWS AND MIKE WALLACE. *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999. xxiv + 1383 pp.

In the thousand-plus pages of text and sixty-nine chapters of *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898*, Walt Whitman appears about a dozen times, usually in a sentence or two, and only once does he stay on stage for any length of time, in a five-page section centered on him. But no matter. Whitman may stand, as was his wont, at the edge of the crowd, a minor player in a cast of thousands; and yet *Gotham* is surely among the handful of indispensable books for anyone with an interest in this poet and his work.

There is no fuller account of Whitman's times than *Gotham* (the name, incidentally, comes from the Anglo-Saxon for "Goats' Town"). Painstakingly, voluminously, attentive to telling detail and significant comment, the authors recount the milieu in which Whitman lived and wrote. It is all here: the slums and squalor, the splendor and pageantry, the struggles and violence, the heroes, the villains, and the victims. Despite its length and exhaustive research, *Gotham* seldom lags, as it tells a story of compelling human interest, with characters and situations worthy of Tolstoy or Dickens.

In the introduction the authors make clear their central conviction, "that it is impossible to understand the history of New York City by looking only at the history of New York City, by focusing, that is, exclusively on events that transpired within the boundaries of what are now its five boroughs." While never losing sight of the main subject, Burrows and Wallace range widely, careful to show how events occurring elsewhere—in France, England, Ireland, other parts of the United States—worked to shape events in New York.

In large part, the story of *Gotham* is a tale of exploitation and oppression, of poverty and degradation, of gains achieved through others' losses. It was so from the early times of Western conquest, when, in the 1660s, the Dutch settlers of New Amsterdam held about three hundred slaves, perhaps twenty percent of the total population. Peter Stuyvesant alone owned about forty. Eventually the slavery would go, but the oppression remained; many workers would remain *de facto* slaves for life, call them what you will. During Whitman's lifetime, to narrow the focus, hours for laborers were long (a ten to fourteen hour day was standard, and the seventeen-hour day was not unknown), pay was pathetically inadequate for all but the most marginal of lives, conditions were often abominable beyond imagining, and there was little recourse for the oppressed. Workers could be fired without notice and replaced immediately, as the frequent surges of immigrants made available a constant supply of cheap and needy labor. Poverty was rampant: New York City included among its population large numbers of beggars, derelicts, drifters, and the desperately impoverished, as well as much smaller numbers of the immensely wealthy. Thousands lived in the streets, homeless and hopeless.

While *Gotham* covers a wide variety of topics, broadly detailing the life of the times, the dominant theme, encompassing many others, has to be that of economic struggle, which went beyond labor and management issues to include hostilities of race and nationality, for New York was truly an international city in the 1800s, and the various immigrant groups—Germans, Irish, Italians, Eastern Europeans, Jews, African Americans, Chinese—were forced to battle for available space and work. Conditions were always deplorable, but they were

immeasurably worsened by the four major economic collapses of Whitman's lifetime, the "panics" of 1819, 1837, 1857, and 1873 (there would be a fifth, in 1893, not long after Whitman's death).

Unions were formed to battle for workers' rights, with limited success. Whitman's lines from "Song of Myself"—"Many sweating and ploughing and thrashing, and then the chaff for payment receiving, / A few idly owning, and they the wheat continually claiming"—succinctly summarize the union argument, although the pastoral imagery has little to do with the grimy shops and factories of nineteenth-century New York. The union movement gained (starting from practically nothing in 1833, by 1836 the labor movement had enrolled some two-thirds of New York's workers into fifty-two organizations) and lost, weakened by economic collapse and militant opposition. After reaching a high of some forty-five thousand members, the union rolls of New York City, battered by economic depressions and the violent opposition of government and employers, had dwindled to about five thousand by the late 1870s.

Still, throughout the century, labor battled against oppression. There were many strikes in New York early in Whitman's lifetime, including those of the tailoresses in 1825 (the first all-female strike), the waterfront workers in the same year, the handloom weavers in 1828, the tailors in 1833, Croton Aqueduct workers in 1837, and more. Often, but not always, the result was the same: the strike was quelled by government forces employed to protect the interests of management. Inequities remained, and they were startling. "In 1863," the authors observe, "the upper 1 percent of income earners (sixteen hundred families) garnered about 61 percent of the city's wealth." The general attitude of the rich is not unfairly represented by the immensely popular Congregationalist minister Henry Ward Beecher's observation that a wage of one dollar a day was, to be sure, not much, but it would buy bread, and water was free; and, he went on to intone, as his audience laughed and applauded, "the man who cannot live on bread and water is not fit to live." At the time of these comments Beecher's annual income was approximately thirty thousand dollars.

Nineteenth-century New York City was, not surprisingly, a center for rebel thinkers and activists, passionate champions of social, sexual, and racial equality (the unions, it should be noted, while undeniably working for progress, excluded blacks and women from their ranks). Among others, the prominent figures included Fanny Wright ("the most notorious orator of her age"); George Henry Evans, editor of the *Workingmen's Advocate*, which proclaimed as a slogan in its first issue (1829) that "All children are entitled to equal education; all adults to equal property; and all mankind, to equal privilege"; Langton Byllesby, author of *Observations on the Sources and Effects of Unequal Wealth*, published in 1826; Thomas Skidmore, whose *Rights of Man to Property!*, published in 1829, argued for a redistribution of land, and, consequently, of wealth; feminist and advocate of "Free Love" Victoria Woodhull, who in 1872 ran for President on the People's Party ticket, with Frederick Douglass as vice-presidential nominee (yes, at the time women were denied the vote, but nothing in the Constitution said they couldn't run for office).

Knowledge of the issues and conflicts of the time shows, among other things, how truly *visionary* Whitman's poetry is, how it portrays an *ideal* rather than the reality. By and large, Whitman's workers are generally content and confident,

even joyous (“The shoemaker singing as he sits on his bench. . .”). The exploited, the wretched, the down-and-out, the homeless, the impoverished—such as we see, for example, in Jacob Riis’s *How the Other Half Lives* (1890)—these remain largely hidden. There are exceptions, of course; in “Song of Myself” the prostitute, the opium-eater, and the hounded slave come to mind, among others, but they appear only briefly, and on the periphery. Similarly, Whitman’s “Mannahatta”—“City of hurried and sparkling waters! City of spires and masts!”—is not to be confused with the actual city that Whitman the citizen knew, a place of slums and wretched tenements, of garbage piled high on the streets, of the excrement of many thousands of horses, sheep, pigs, and cattle, of overflowing privies and cesspools, of overpowering fetid smells at every turn, and of the foul by-products of various industries and commercial enterprises spilling out onto the walkways; nor, for that matter, is it a place of the grand mansions and stately palaces, ornate and richly embellished, constructed at the command of Belmonts, Morgans, Astors, and their like. Most of all, it is a place of the imagination, a City on a Hill, such as could be, perhaps, but never was. In the New York of Whitman’s poetry—as opposed to the city of Whitman’s journalism—everyone is, like the children of Lake Wobegon, above average.

Whitman’s poetry turns out to be, surprisingly for one of so many guises, just what he said it was in “Song of Myself,” a poetry of celebration (“I am satisfied. . . . I see, dance, laugh, sing”), and not, despite the ample causes, a poetry of protest. It is a poetry truly *romantic*: the view is cosmic, not local; the crises are personal, not public. Whitman, true to his instincts, remains on the outside, *as a poet* generally keeping his distance from the issues and conflicts of his times (his prose writings were of course another matter). Whitman’s position *as poet* is made clear in “Song of Myself”: “What blurt is it about virtue and about vice? / Evil propels me, and reform of evil propels me . . . I stand indifferent” To the poet, Iago is one with Desdemona.

The Whitman who proclaimed in *Democratic Vistas* that “society, in these States, is canker’d, crude, superstitious, and rotten” always comes as a shock, since this is not the society found in the poems. The line of social protest is one theme that Whitman the poet *might* have explored in great depth and detail—he was not unaware of injustice—but did not. While fully aware of the reform movements of his time, and often sympathetic to them, he refused to put his poetry to their service. Like Emerson, he recognized that he could not be both poet and protester, and he made his choice. In 1861 Emerson wrote in his journal, “Just now, the supreme public duty of all thinking men is to assert freedom,” and so, in his way, he did—as, in *his* way, did Whitman.

Whitman may have aspired to be the poet of a nation, or so he would have us believe, but in the end his deepest impulses prevailed. In style as in thought, Whitman was too much himself, too much the individual and the artist, to have truly broad appeal. Had he chosen to write more in the vein of “O Captain! My Captain!” he might have achieved some measure of commercial and popular success, but the cost would have been higher than he was willing to pay, and he knew it. In the end Whitman remains the poet of the *self*, the inner being in all its complexities, conflicts, joys and sorrows. He had it right in “Song of Myself”: “Apart from the pulling and hauling stands what I am. . . .”