

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



David Von Drehle. *Triangle: The Fire That Changed America*. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2003. 340 pp. \$25.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87113-874-3.

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David Von Drehle's *Triangle: The Fire That Changed America* is an exemplary popular history. Von Drehle has put together the full story, beginning with the "Uprising of the Twenty Thousand," the shirtwaist workers' strike that established the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union. The dramatic confrontation between immigrant "working girls" and their employers, led by the owners of the Triangle Shirtwaist Company, lasted for months and, due in large measure to the involvement of leading suffrage advocates, college women, and reformers, attracted enormous popular attention and sympathy. It ended in a significant but partial victory for the union. Chief among the handful of large firms that successfully held out against its recognition was Triangle.

The 1911 fire claimed over 140 victims, most of them young immigrant women. John Sloan, who drew several memorable cartoons about the fire and who witnessed its horrors first hand, wrote in his diary that the dead were not anonymous. They were the strikers. Von Drehle follows their story through the trial of Triangle owners Max Blank and Isaac Harris for manslaughter (a locked door prevented many from escaping) and the formation of the New York State legislative commission, co-chaired by Al Smith and Robert Wagner, that did much to reform factory safety and, in the process, to invent the urban liberalism that would characterize the Democratic Party for much of the rest of the century.

It is a story eminently worth telling and Von Drehle tells it well. Central to his narrative strategy is the focus upon individual workers. The "Uprising" becomes, in his hands, the tale of specific strikers, the fire a tragedy with individualized victims. This makes it easy for the reader to identify with his protagonists.

Portions of this story have been memorably told before, especially in the case of Leon Stein's classic account of the fire. But Von Drehle has added much new detail about the trial of Harris and Blank. For years the transcript was thought lost, but he managed to locate two of the three volumes. Those of us who previously had to rely upon newspaper accounts are in his debt. He also helps rescue Max Steuer, the defense attorney, from the shadows. Steuer was, like Harris and Blank as well as most of the victims, a Jewish immigrant from eastern Europe. Like them, he started out on the Lower East Side. He worked; went to night school; dropped out of college without graduating; but still managed to get through law school in two years. He then entered private practice and soon had several clients connected to Tammany Hall. His successes in cases that the hall was involved with established his reputation. His success in getting Harris and Blank found not guilty made him a national figure in the legal community. Von Drehle deserves our gratitude for bringing together so much information about a figure who was, Clarence Darrow alone excepted, the leading defense attorney of the era.

Triangle: The Fire That Changed America is a popular, not a scholarly study, and Von Drehle does not seek to situate his work in the scholarship about immigration, labor, progressive reform, or other relevant topics. Scholarly readers may find this occasionally troubling. His discussion of urban liberalism, for example, will strike most as oversimplified, as will the connections he draws between the work of Smith and Wagner in the 1910s and the New Deal policies a generation later. These problems, however, should not keep historians from ordering the work for their college or university libraries or from assigning it to undergraduates.

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