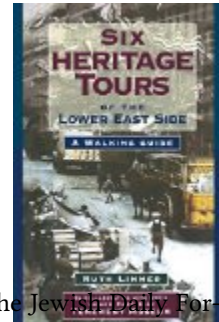


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Ruth Limmer. *Six Heritage Tours of the Lower East Side*. New York: New York University Press, 1997. xi + 214 pp. \$12.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8147-5130-5.

Reviewed by David Potash (New York University)
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Readily apprehended and yet easily misunderstood, New York City offers both the scholar and tourist limitless opportunities for exploration, discovery, and analysis. A new effort among the innumerable guides to Manhattan is Ruth Limmer's *Six Heritage Tours of the Lower East Side*. The book, produced in collaboration with the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, offers a selective and somewhat unusual take on the city. Drawing upon the efforts of several specialists, Limmer, editor of the Lower East Side Tenement Museum's *Tenement Times*, presents six walking excursions through the Lower East Side. Each tour, based on a particular ethnic history and heritage (African Heritage, German Heritage, Irish Heritage, Chinese Heritage, Eastern European Jewish Heritage, and Italian Heritage), consists of a brief introduction, a map, and short descriptions of fifteen to eighteen sites. Several sites appear in multiple "heritages," and the emphasis is on positive social history. On average, each walking tour takes at least two hours to complete.

Neither a scholarly treatise nor an effort targeted for general consumption, the book touches on some important academic issues, and it is aimed perhaps at the advanced high school or introductory college level. While the prose is clear and the sites are easy to identify, this book is not well suited for those with little knowledge of city's history. In fact, Limmer provides a brief bibliography and suggests that readers prepare with additional reading before using the book.

Some tours are more effective than others in providing tangible markers to an ethnic group's heritage. The Eastern European Jewish tour is perhaps the most successful in capturing such a social history. Excluding a lone stop on East 12th Street at the Yiddish Art Theater, the tour concentrates on the neighborhood south of De-

lancey Street. The Tailor's Union, the Jewish Daily Forward Building, Seward Park and the Seward Park Public Library, the Educational Alliance and the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society—all located on East Broadway—as well as the Henry Street Settlement and a few other sites, outline several major contours of Eastern European Jewish history in Manhattan. In contrast, nineteenth century immigrant life remains somewhat elusive in the German Heritage tour, which starts on Grand Street, moves east to the Bowery, then north to St. Marks Place, before finally heading south at Thompkins Square Park. Some of the sites are nondescript structures that would normally be overlooked, such as the Germania Assembly Rooms at Bowery and Houston Street. Also included, though, are architectural gems, like the Ottendorfer Library and Stuyvesant Polyclinic on Second Avenue.

The Chinese Heritage Tour, clustered in a three-block radius around Mott Street, provides interesting information on a host of relatively inconspicuous structures. As the ethnic composition of the area today is primarily Chinese, it is somewhat easier to gain an appreciation of how an immigrant group appropriated and used urban space over time. The expansion of the Chinese community and immigration patterns over the past fifty years are not discussed, as they are considered "beyond the purview of a heritage guide" (p. 105). The Irish and Italian Heritage Tours offer rich material for social history, particularly since many of the sites are of importance to both groups. The Irish tour begins at St. Peter's Church, 22 Barclay Street, and meanders northward before ending at McSorley's Ale House on East 7th Street. The Italian tour starts at Five Points (also included in the Irish tour), and moves north. It terminates in the West Village at Greenwich House, the former home of the Cooperative Social Settlement Society.

Few structures central to African-American heritage are standing today in lower Manhattan. This tour covers a great deal of ground, ranging from East 10th Street to the tip of Manhattan and then north to Prince Street, but ultimately is unsuccessful in representing the complicated history of the city's slaves and free blacks. Many of the sites present only the barest clues to life in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries. For instance, Washington Square Park is included because a slave named Big Manuel cleared land in the part and farmed there in 1643 (p. 12). Neither the guide nor the space today, however, provides any real sense of life for Big Manuel or his contemporaries.

Reflecting the multiple meanings that can be read into a particular place, the sites chosen do not always clearly signify an ethnic identity. For instance, the Brooklyn Bridge, designed by the German-born John A. Roebling and used by New Yorkers of all backgrounds, is presented as part of the Irish Heritage tour because of the large number of Irish laborers who worked on its construction. 19 Washington Place, the site of the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire, is found in the Italian heritage tour. Approximately one-third of the women who died in the tragedy were of Italian origin, and the majority who perished were Jewish. The historical significance of the fire reached well beyond either group. It is highly problematic to attach

either of these sites to a particular ethnic grouping, especially since Limmer does not adequately address issues of social control and authority. Moreover, the concept of a "heritage," as opposed to a history, muddies potential analysis.

At first glance *Six Heritage Tours of the Lower East Side* looks like a field guide; it is attractively designed and it fits comfortably in one's hand. The tours are enjoyable and provocative, particularly in the selection of neglected spaces and forgotten buildings. Walking through lower Manhattan with the book forced me to look at neighborhoods in different ways, and I am certain that even the most well informed Gothamite would learn something from the guide. However, Limmer tends to treat the sites as vehicles for the presentation of short historical discussions, virtually all of which are covered more thoroughly in scholarly works. In other words, what I and I imagine the members of this group would consider to be the really fascinating part of the walking tours—detailed information about the sites themselves—is missing. Ironically, Limmer's attempts at heightened accessibility have greatly reduced her book's relevance for scholars.

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