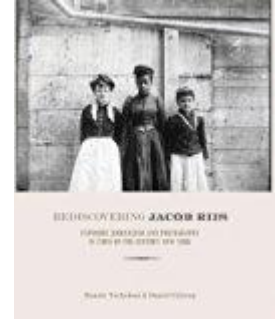


Bonnie Yochelson, Daniel J. Czitrom. *Rediscovering Jacob Riis: Exposure Journalism and Photography in Turn-of-the-Century New York.* New York: New Press, 2007. Plates. xx + 268 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-59558-199-0.



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Jacob Riis and the Power of Visual Journalism

It was Winston Churchill who made this rather interesting remark about the role of history in his life: "History will be kind to me because I intend to write it." He was not alone. In fact, the subject of this interesting book by Bonnie Yochelson and Daniel J. Czitrom looks at one player in American journalism who did exactly what Churchill intended to do when he made the remark. Jacob Riis has often been cited as the person who drew photography into an essential role in journalistic investigation and discovery. Yet the Riis who emerges in both sections of this book comes across as an accidental creative hero. Both Yochelson and Czitrom are intrigued by the fact that Riis seldom took his own photographs, and when he did, he often relegated the negatives to a secondary place behind the scripts that he used for both his writings and his public speeches and demonstrations. In fact, it is a miracle that we have any of the Riis legacy with us today. Many of his glass negatives and speech notes sat in an attic in New York City

undisturbed for several decades. Had Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst both treated their newspapers as Riis did his pictures, their respective legacies would be called into question.

The memory of Riis in this book often comes across as something larger than the legends that created him. This is the story of a young Danish reporter who came to America and developed an exciting and lasting career focusing on one subject, namely, urban poverty. Does he provide us with a lasting legacy about city life in the closing years of the Gilded Age? One should not forget that seldom is time the accurate governing council of events in the human existence. Memories fade, stories get changed, and those with firsthand knowledge of historical events seldom possess foolproof memories.

It would seem that the Riis inheritance could challenge this approach, and in the book it does in

most cases. It is clear to me that the authors are in love with Riis in a professional way, but they do not resort to any form of hero worship. In fact, Riis often comes across as a person who is really not all that loveable. He sticks with his work as a reporter in the district of New York known as the Mulberry Bend, one of the least desirable neighborhoods in all of America. This location would prove to be provident since all the action came right to Riis on his doorstep. This is not to suggest that he did not step out once in a while to investigate more distant occurrences, but he certainly did not stray far from home most of the time. Although some historians have treated him as a serious muckraker before the name would be applied to the likes of Lincoln Steffens, Ida Tarbell, and Ray Stannard Baker, among others, the Riis legacy is solidly founded in visual journalism where it should probably be better known. Neither of these two authors gives any solid credibility to Riis's role as a primarily investigative journalist, although the many versions of his well-known *How the Other Half Lives* (1890) point in that direction. Unlike other reporters who move on to stories once such stories have been thoroughly exploited, Riis stuck with the same tales in different venues. He made a career of one subject.

As for the book itself, it is somewhat unusual. The first 120 pages are Czitrom's look at Riis's New York. The writing is clear and to the point. It has vitality but lacks any sense of thundering action. The main strength is Czitrom's ability to link the photographer to the world in which he lived. Czitrom takes Riis from his European beginnings to his devotion to his Protestant faith and his moral crusade to better the lives of the majority of the poverty-stricken subjects he photographed. Yocheson's contribution begins on page 121, and, in effect, her segment is a separate book. I was somewhat taken aback by this approach since some of the figures and part of the story related by Czitrom in the first section reappear in the second. Although the repetition in both picture and text is

not troubling, I was still surprised when I discovered that it existed. The book contains a series of well-known Riis photographs in both sections, and the authors employ those images to show the consistency of the approach Riis took while wandering among his New York constituency. As well, much of the Riis personality slowly reveals itself in the pictures, something that both Czitrom and Yochelson discuss at some length. Through the photography, one clearly sees the roots of the Riis approach to journalism.

But if there is one thing that really shouted out for change it is the size of the book. We all know that money is a driving force behind publication today even with nonprofit operators, such as the New Press. But the 6-by-8 size does not lend itself easily to photographs and drawings that contain the kind of detail normally found in late nineteenth-century publications. Still, size should not distract readers from a very interesting visit to the past. Do what I did: read the book first, and then pick up a magnifying glass and review the pictures a second time. It will be worth the effort.

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