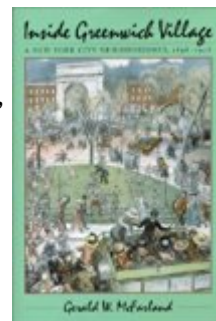


**Gerald W. McFarland.** *Inside Greenwich Village: A New York City Neighborhood, 1898-1918.* Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001. xii + 272 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-55849-299-8.



**Reviewed by** Michael A. Lerner

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## Bohemian Rhapsody

At an annual meeting of the American Historical Association several years ago, I found myself in a job interview with a professor who found the most remarkable thing about my c.v. to be my home address. Not a minute into the interview, he looked up from the page with a faraway look in his eyes and asked, "You live in Greenwich Village?"

Thinking this bode well for my interview, I smiled and began to answer that I did indeed live in Greenwich Village, just a short walk from NYU, in a steal of an apartment in an 1845 brick townhouse. Before I could get any further, he interrupted to ask another question. "Has it changed?"

To this day, I'm not sure what answer my interviewer was looking for. I won't bother recreating the response I stammered through, as I don't think he was listening much either. Clearly, the mere mention of Greenwich Village had transported him to some mystical place of his youth, filled with coffee houses, jazz clubs, and finger-snapping beatniks. Such is the mystique of Greenwich Village.

Since the days of Edgar Allan Poe, Walt Whitman, and Herman Melville, just three of the literary icons to pass through the neighborhood, Greenwich Village has continuously evoked images of bohemianism and cultural radicalism, of artists, poets, writers, and musicians. In the 1910s, when the neighborhood hosted Mabel Dodge's legendary salons and Max Eastman's groundbreaking journal *The Masses*, its reputation as an American mecca for freethinkers, feminists, cultural critics, and other self-styled rebels blossomed. In the late 1940s and 1950s, the reputation held fast when Greenwich Village served as the East Coast headquarters of the Beat movement, the birthplace of abstract expressionism, and the preeminent showcase for jazz and folk music. In the 1960s and 1970s, the idea of Greenwich Village as a countercultural haven continued to grow, fueled by the Stonewall riots and the Village's central place in the gay liberation movement. Indeed, what other neighborhood in America could boast a roster of past and present residents that compares with Thomas Paine, Emma Goldman, Alfred Stieglitz, Djuna Barnes, Marcel Duchamp, Willem de Kooning, Eleanor Roosevelt, John Sloan, Mary

Heaton Vorse, Hippolyte Havel, Jessie Tarbox Beals, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Stanley Crouch, Meyer Schapiro, Laurie Anderson, and Lou Reed?

But is the Greenwich Village of radicals, bohemians, artists, and writers the "real Greenwich Village?" This is the question at the heart of Gerald McFarland's self-described "contrarian" examination of Greenwich Village between 1898 and 1918. Here, McFarland attempts to strip away the romantic notions that have resulted in one history after another of what the author calls "the tiny group of cultural radicals who lived in the neighborhood." Instead, McFarland's book focuses on the lives of "nonbohemian villagers," arguing that a fresh look at the history of the neighborhood, especially the interactions between the Village's various ethnic and class groups, may offer valuable insights into how ethnically mixed neighborhoods have functioned in the United States. As McFarland notes, the Greenwich Village of his study is "a veritable laboratory for investigating how a culturally diverse neighborhood functioned early in the twentieth century" (p. 6). As such, the author implies, the history of Greenwich Village in the early 1900s may offer valuable lessons for multicultural neighborhoods at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

>From the opening pages of the book, McFarland aims to get as much mileage as he can from his contrarian stance. Boldly, he claims to have set out "to provide a more inclusive portrait of life inside Greenwich Village than had any previous history of the neighborhood in the early twentieth century" (p. xii). Contrasting his study with two of the classic works on the district, Floyd Dell's 1926 memoir *Love in Greenwich Village* and *Caroline Ware's 1935 sociological study* Greenwich Village, 1920-1930, McFarland charges that past works have captured neither the full range of the Village's diversity, nor the ways in which "nonbohemian" villagers dealt with the myriad social changes that transformed their neighborhood in the years before World War One.

Using Dell's memoir as his foil, McFarland frames his study as a look at the "Sixth Village," the incarnation of the neighborhood just before it was overrun in 1913 by the cohort of intellectuals and writers who characterized Dell's bohemian "Seventh Village." Using this framework, McFarland effectively portrays turn-of-the-century Greenwich Village as a vibrant neighborhood of working-class immigrants, African Americans, settlement houses, ethnic churches, neighborhood associations, and old-stock patricians, whose intertwined community history has been largely overshadowed by the bohemians who arrived later.

Despite McFarland's strongly contrarian introduction, what follows is a remarkably noncontrarian book. *Inside Greenwich Village* proceeds as a series of neighborhood portraits, each examining the various facets of life in the district in the early twentieth century. We are given glimpses into the predominantly black district called Little Africa, a look at the evolution of the neighborhood's Italian churches, and insight into the intricacies of machine politics in the Irish ward. We see the arrival of the settlement workers who founded Greenwich House, and with them new efforts to improve the health and welfare of the area's working-class residents. We peer into the world of the patricians who lived around Washington Square Park, and see their attempts to intervene as the neighborhood around them swiftly changed. Finally, McFarland documents the arrival of the bohemians, and the rapid transformation of the neighborhood into a playground for cultural radicals and those who came to gawk at them.

For all McFarland's complaints that the pre-bohemian history of Greenwich Village has been overlooked, much of the material here will be familiar to scholars of New York City history. Ethnic histories of Italian and Irish New York have already explored many of the facets of the neighborhood that McFarland presents, and the history

of the settlement house movement in New York City is also well-traveled ground. McFarland's treatment of the Village patricians does, however, delve into less studied aspect of the neighborhood's history.

Though not groundbreaking, the value of McFarland's book lies in its ability to bring together these disparate threads of Greenwich Village history into a concise narrative. McFarland's work is thorough, well-researched, and well-written, and he does a nice job of bringing Greenwich Village to life on the page. Of special note is McFarland's brief treatment of the tragic fire at the Triangle Shirtwaist Company in 1911. Here, his vivid descriptions of the burning building, the fire department's frenzied yet futile response, and the fire's devastating toll on the neighborhood, where local churches held memorial masses for months to follow, are eerily prescient of what New York experienced more recently during the terrorist attack of September 11. Additionally, when McFarland details reformers' attempts to regulate social life in the district, working-class life in the district comes to life as it would in a John Sloan drawing.

Ironically, *Inside Greenwich Village* comes to life most when the writers, bohemians, and artists of Floyd Dell's Seventh Village begin to creep into the narrative. Mabel Dodge's salons, Polly Hallyday's famed restaurant, the Paterson Strike Pageant, and the productions of the Provincetown Players are all here, and McFarland's account of them is a pleasure to read. Again, none of this is new material, yet McFarland brings the cultural bustle of Greenwich Village alive while showing what the rapid changes in the district meant for the neighborhood's longtime residents.

Were McFarland not so strongly contrarian in introducing his project, it would help the reader accept it for what it is--a nicely written, concise neighborhood history of Greenwich Village from 1898 to 1918. Yet in trying to reverse the priorities of most historical studies of Greenwich Village by shifting away from the focus on bohemians, Mc-

Farland only ends up reaffirming the reasons why historians have found the history of the Seventh Village so attractive. Unintentionally, this raises an important question. Why do historians need to look at Greenwich Village anyway?

McFarland's premise that Greenwich Village somehow offers a model for mixed-class, multi-ethnic neighborhoods is interesting, but somewhat misplaced. As any number of American urban histories have shown, the story of different class groups and ethnic communities trying to co-exist in an urban environment is hardly unique to Greenwich Village. Other studies have explored this process in greater detail, and with much more impressive results.[1]

Instead, the importance of Greenwich Village in American culture would seem to lie precisely in the history McFarland wants to play down. For over 150 years, the Village has been America's bohemia. Its reputation as such has been exaggerated, abused, exploited, and commercialized, but that is undeniably Greenwich Village's historical legacy. Again and again, avant-gardists, non-conformists, and cultural innovators flocked to Greenwich Village not because it typified a mixed-class, multi-ethnic American neighborhood, but because of the ways in which it was atypical. It offered an atmosphere of personal and creative freedom available nowhere else in the United States. That should explain why so many historians have focused on bohemian Greenwich Village rather than its ethnic and working-class quarters. Considering Greenwich Village's place in American cultural history, it would seem that is where the focus rightly belongs.

#### Note

[1]. See for example Roy Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours for What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) or Gary R. Mormino and George E. Pozzetta, *The Immigrant World of Ybor City: Italians and their Latin Neighbors in*

*Tampa, 1885-1985* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990.)

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