

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Thomas J. Carrier. *Washington, DC: A Historical Walking Tour.* Chicago: Arcadia Publishing, 1999. 128 pp. \$18.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7385-0049-2.

Thomas J. Carrier. *Historic Georgetown: A Walking Tour.* Chicago: Arcadia Publishing, 1999. 128 pp. \$18.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7385-0239-7.

Thomas J. Carrier. *The White House, the Capitol, and the Supreme Court: Historic Self-Guided Tours.* Chicago: Arcadia Publishing, 2000. 128 pp. \$18.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7385-0557-2.

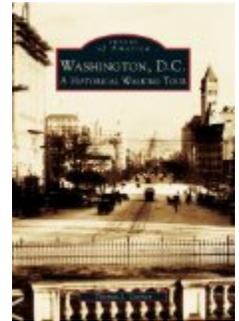
Philip Woodworth Ogilvie. *Along the Potomac.* Chicago: Arcadia Publishing, 2000. 128 pp. \$18.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7385-0352-3.

Paul K. Williams. *Dupont Circle.* Chicago: Arcadia Publishing, 2000. 128 pp. \$18.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7385-0633-3.

Paul K. Williams. *The Neighborhood of Logan, Scott, and Thomas Circles.* Chicago: Arcadia Publishing, 2001. 128 pp. \$19.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7385-1404-8.

Paul K. Williams. *Greater U Street.* Chicago: Arcadia Publishing, 2002. 128 pp. \$19.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7385-1423-9.

Reviewed by David Haberstich (Archives Center, National Museum of American History)
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“Et in Arcadia Ego”: Images of Washington by Arcadia Publishing

“I am in Arcadia”: Images of Washington by Arcadia Publishing

While perusing this group of books on Washington, issued by Arcadia Publishing, I recalled a paper by art historian Erwin Panofsky concerning paintings by Guercino and Poussin which bear the obscure title selected for this review. Panofsky explained that this puzzling Latin phrase, which seems to mean “and I am in Arcadia,” has another, more profound translation. That ambiguity echoes the somewhat ambiguous or dual purpose and method of these books (hence the pun on “Arcadia”). The ambiguity and the flawed results leave me ambivalent. I find them a mixed blessing: there is much to

like, but problems of balance and reproduction quality are troubling. These volumes seem to cover, in relatively few words and a plethora of pictures, virtually every aspect of the history of the nation’s capital and its political, cultural, economic, and residential life. Knowledgeable Washingtonians might devise an entertaining game of discerning what has been missed or neglected and debating the significance of the omissions.

Although it is distasteful to fault noble endeavors which fail, I must complain. The series is ambitious, but flawed. The covers of the books are handsome, with warm, rich photographs, but the images inside, quite frankly, can induce eyestrain and a headache. For the

price of about nineteen to twenty dollars each, it seems that Arcadia could have done a better job. The dreariness of the gray, often fuzzy reproductions simply does not do justice to Washington. These books provide a wealth of succinct textual information, to be sure, but since they present themselves primarily as picture books, one may be forgiven for judging them accordingly. Are the standards of lovers of beautifully produced photographic books just impossibly high, snobbish and elitist? Perhaps, since these volumes are relatively modest user guides, not coffee-table extravaganzas; but it seems that, within their intended genre, they ultimately fail some tests of user-friendliness. These are books which one wants to like, but the poor reproduction quality compromises the effectiveness of the text. One sometimes has to strain to identify details described in captions. All the books were printed in England: ironically, there are probably printers in the Washington region who could do a better job, and Arcadia seriously needs to address the quality issue. The reproduction quality of the most recent volumes, Paul K. Williams's *The Neighborhoods of Logan, Scott, and Thomas Circles* (2001), and *Greater U Street*, published this year, however, shows improvement in some—although not all—images, with greater contrast and richer blacks, so perhaps this problem is on the way to a solution. Yet even in these two books, some illustrations are inexplicably fuzzy.

Part of the problem is the format. It is difficult to pack so many pictures into small-format books in an interesting manner. They need to be bigger—perhaps magazine size. Each book has 128 pages, and the one in which I counted illustrations yielded the figure 212. Yet it needs more pictures. In the three books with “tour” or “tours” in the subtitle, the author, Thomas J. Carrier, frequently opts to show portraits of persons after whom buildings and memorials were named in lieu of the structures themselves. Instead of a picture of the Taft Memorial, for example, we are shown a portrait of Robert Taft. Now on one hand, if the “tour” concept is taken literally and the tourist is actually toting the book as a supplement to the experience of viewing buildings and monuments firsthand, the rationale is clear: provide historical and pictorial addenda to contextualize the sights to be seen while strolling through the city. The site maps seem adequate to enable the user to spot the actual buildings and monuments—although “sites” are more ambiguous in the book on the White House, Capitol, and Supreme Court: there are no maps or diagrams keyed to the site numbers in the captions to help the tourist keep track. But a “reality check” in the form of an informal, statistically in-

valid survey of a few colleagues revealed that they believe part of the point of a “walking tour” guide should be to illustrate the actual things they will view instead of forcing them to play guessing games in identifying the structures. There seems something mildly fraudulent about a caption proclaiming “Joseph Henry Memorial” beside a photograph of Henry instead of the memorial itself. Yes, there is a site map identifying where the statue stands so you can physically locate it, but why not illustrate the statue? One feels the need for two images, both the photograph “from life” as well as a decent photograph of the memorial. Portraits of Everett M. Dirk, Philip Hart, Joseph Cannon, Hubert H. Humphrey, and others accompany captions for their eponymous buildings. This is useful, but one yearns for images of the buildings themselves, despite the cramped space. In other cases, photographs of vanished structures accompany captions which describe both the illustration and the modern occupant of the site, thereby providing the “tourist” with significant historical context but no visual orientation for the walking tour. The practical need for a contemporary counterpart, the “now” or “after” view of the site, to contrast with the “before” image, is keenly felt. This procedure is reversed in a view of today’s Hirshhorn Museum, whose caption mentions the Army Medical Museum, unillustrated, which once stood on the same site. If the intention of the book is to provide both a practical guide to the modern city as well as a visual tour of the past, perhaps it should facilitate both more consistently with pictures, rather than alternating between the two concepts.

In Thomas Carrier’s *Washington, D.C.: A Historical Walking Tour*, the captions occasionally feel too long, some of them studded with unnecessary miscellany. It appears to reflect the information which Carrier, the author and a professional tour guide, would provide in person—chatty and slightly meandering, but informative and likely to appeal to a broad audience, which often appreciates sidebars. But a book is not exactly a walking tour. Adding illustrations of the sites, or even details of them as they appear today, would be a boon.

The other volumes include: Thomas Carrier, *Historic Georgetown: A Walking Tour* (1999); Carrier *The White House, The Capitol, and the Supreme Court: Historic Self-Guided Tours* (2000); Paul K. Williams, *The Neighborhood of Logan, Scott, and Thomas Circles* (2001); Williams, *Dupont Circle* (2000); Williams, *Greater U Street* (2002); and Philip Woodworth Ogilvie, *Along the Potomac* (2000). The last work succeeds in being somewhat more attractive than the others because it contains a number of

line illustrations which reproduce better than the muddy photographs which often mar the series. It differs radically from the volumes on Washington *per se* in terms of subject matter because it concerns itself more with the natural history of the Potomac region than with structures and either national or local politics. On the other hand, it seems to blend skillfully historical issues with geography and nature lore. It has a unique flavor and, although I am not qualified to judge it against rival volumes which may (or may not) exist, it has a particularly authoritative feel.

Minor editorial problems also plague some of the texts. Carrier has occasional annoying syntactical lapses, and Williams is guilty of some misspellings. The *U Street* volume calls Fats Waller “Walker” and talks of interest in the U Street area “spurning” rather than “spurring” construction. A caption in *Dupont Circle* calls trolleys “trolley’s”, an example of the creeping apostrophitis which humorist Dave Barry occasionally has derided unmercifully. An Addison Scurlock photograph of the Lincoln Temple dedication is uncredited.

The quality of picture selection varies. The variety is particularly enchanting in *Dupont Circle*, in which historic buildings are shown, along with portraits of famous residents of the area throughout its history, as well as news pictures made in the modern era. The picture selection in Carrier’s book on the White House, Capitol, and Supreme Court, however, is just plain odd. The emphasis on the sculptures of the Capitol seems disproportionate, especially because the capsule biographies of such figures as Colbert and Suleiman the Magnificent which accompany the illustrations of the House’s bas-reliefs of these “lawgivers” receive too much emphasis (twelve pages, ten per cent of the book). Not that the bas-reliefs shouldn’t be shown and explicated, but the section appropriates too much space. In terms of reproduction quality, they are among the more successful illustrations in the book, making others seem shabby by comparison. By contrast, the Supreme Court (Tour C) is given short shrift in a brief section (ten pages); here lies buried the fact that Cass Gilbert was the architect

of the Supreme Court’s 1935 building, within a caption for the sculptures in the pediment above the main entrance. One or two of Gilbert’s preliminary sketches for the building would have been a useful and interesting addition. And, in *Washington, D.C.: A Historical Walking Tour*, a book crowded with poor reproductions, it is difficult to justify the same portrait of Ulysses Grant appearing twice, merely cropped differently. Other portraits are repeated several times among the books, consuming valuable space. The editors should have been more alert to this needless duplication, although perhaps they did not suspect that some reviewer would inspect the books as a group rather than separately.

The photographs in *Greater U Street* are varied and fascinating, with a liberal sprinkling of poignant images by Gordon Parks, Robert H. McNeill, and other photographers, but the section on the 1968 riots is grimmer than necessary due to disappointing photographic quality. It is hard to believe that some sharper pictures could not have been chosen. An amateur snapshot of an out-of-focus Robert Kennedy strolling past the out-of-focus riot aftermath seems particularly gratuitous.

Despite all the above complaints, the exercise of compiling historically oriented pictorial guidebooks to Washington has led the authors to prepare valuable introductory writings, and their knowledge, enthusiasm, and diligence shine through the often inadequate reproductions. While there were lapses of judgment in the selection of pictures, which sometimes do not do justice to the texts, their efforts to provide variety and a sweeping panorama of their subject matter are admirable. It is to be hoped that these volumes can someday provide the basis for revised editions. The addition of a few more pictures in strategic locations, substitutes for others, some tinkering with design, and improved reproduction quality, while retaining basically unaltered textual content, would produce a superior series. On the other hand, Mr. Carrier would be well advised to condense the “lawgiver” biographies in order to give the Supreme Court more prominence.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

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