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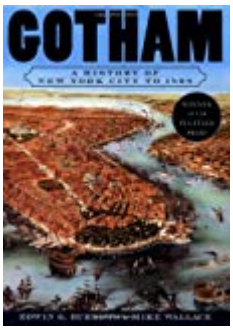

Edwin G. Burrows, Mike Wallace. *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. xxiv + 1383 pp. $49.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-511634-2.

Reviewed by Milton Goldin

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Gotham demonstrates the wisdom of never judging a book by its cover--or by its heft. Its dust jacket suggests yet another in the apparently endless series of New York City social histories; and given its nearly five pounds, suspicious readers may leap to the conclusion that Burrows and Wallace are academics who never saw a detail they could not include. To the contrary, the book is an extraordinary interweaving of business history and social history that results in a reference work which not only tells us how, but why, the metropolis was well on its way to becoming the financial capital of the world on New Year's Eve in 1898, when "the nation's first- and fourth-largest cities would merge into a supercity--Greater New York--that would encompass not only Manhattan and Brooklyn, but Queens, Staten Island, and the Bronx as well" (p. 1218).

The authors move quickly from Manhattan's earliest Indian inhabitants to Peter Stuyvesant's New Amsterdam, founded in 1624 as a fur-trading outpost for the Dutch West India Company. Dutch settlers were very different in temperament from Puritan settlers--more phlegmatic, less fanatical, and far more interested in making money, legally or otherwise, than in probing deeper meanings of Christianity. Another major difference was that the Dutch displayed unruly traits not usually encountered among devout types. Saloonkeepers ignored regulations to close on time, not to sell liquor on Sundays during preachings, and not to pawn articles that customers offered for drink. Stuyvesant increased fines for settlers who struck other settlers, but New Amsterdam's residents evidently considered such pleasures well worth the penalties; court records suggest they hit each other as often as possible.[1] From the time the Dutch arrived, England was claiming title to New Amsterdam. But not until 1664 could London assemble armed forces to seize the settlement. Stuyvesant wanted to resist, but inhabitants did not much care who ruled them so long as they could freely pursue commercial interests and amusement, and they opted to surrender. During the remainder of the seventeenth century and since that time, the basic question that perplexed Stuyvesant and the earliest citizens would perplex English and then American political leaders and populations: How can commercial establishments interested almost

exclusively in status, wealth, and power prevent from flying apart a community of increasing diversity?

In their introduction, which serves as a ***tour de horizon*** not only for this volume but for a forthcoming volume in what will be a history of New York City to the present time, Burrows and Wallace make clear the extent to which commerce has dominated the city: "After the Civil War, the metropolis became the principal facilitator of America's own industrialization and imperial (westward) expansion" (p. xvii). And, by the nineteenth century's end, "New York had gained the ability to direct, not just channel, America's industrialization. Financiers like J.P. Morgan established nationwide corporations and housed them in the city, making Manhattan the country's corporate headquarters. When World War I ended European hegemony, and the United States became a creditor nation, New York began to vie with London as fulcrum of the global economy" (p. xviii). Key developments in facilitating the city's "imperial expansion" were the opening of the Erie Canal in October 1825 and railroads, from the late 1850s. Other cities along the eastern seaboard resented New York's burgeoning fortunes, but unfortunately for them, they began digging canals too late. Only with railroads could other cities hope to compete, and in 1860, counting "the still-heavy volume of traffic on the Erie Canal, [New York] received $161 million worth of goods from the West, just about the value of that year's cotton crop" (p. 655).

While some entrepreneurs thus demonstrated their extraordinary talents positioning New York *vis-a-vis* national and international commerce, others made speculation in real estate an art form. The real estate market was driven not only by needs of the rich for factories and palaces for themselves but by immigrants who poured into the city thanks to its promise of employment. Employers never adverse to paying the lowest wages possible had no complaints about realtors extracting the highest rents imaginable from workers.

Like the Dutch, English and American elites had no great fondness for non-Protestants. Jews were tolerated because they took care of their own poor. The problem through much of the nineteenth century was with immigrants who might be Christians but who also happened to be Catholics. In particular there were the Irish, driven from their ancestral homeland by indescribably cruel English policies. To the dismay of New York's Establishments, not only were Irish Catholics unable to finance care for their poor, but by definition they were guilty of allegiance to Rome. Adding to their misery, in searching for employment the Irish resented seeing such signals of disapproval as signs reading, "No Irish need apply."

What the authors call "the sharply unequal distribution of wealth in the city" (p. 144) did not calm nerves. In 1730, "a comprehensive property assessment revealed that the richest 10 percent of the city's taxable population, some 140 merchants and landowners, held almost half its taxable wealth" (p. 144). In 1800, "the richest 20 percent owned almost 80 percent of the city's wealth. The bottom ***half*** owned under 5 percent" (p. 351). By 1892, "60 percent of the leaders of New York's national corporations, investment banks, and railroads were descendants of old-monied families" (p. 1083). In New Amsterdam, care of the poor had been left to religious groups, but with the English came secular welfare policies that continue to inform City Fathers more than three hundred years later. From 1685, "deserving poor ... received assistance for their Reliefe out of the publique Treasury" (p. 145), the idea being to keep them out of sight and to get them off welfare rolls as quickly as possible. Non-residents bereft of money, who happened to be passing through, and all able-bodied residents judged fit to work but unemployed got nothing. Only "deserving poor" were thought worthy of receiving charity. Who were the "de-

serving poor?" Those persons who appeared to be in distress through no fault of their own, such as widows, the sick, and cripples. "Paupers" could receive no charity; their situations clearly stemmed from laziness, fraud, and assorted moral degeneracies. Little was said about the unspeakable practice in Colonial New York of setting free aged or infirm slaves to save money, "a practice so widespread by 1773 that in order to keep down the cost of relief, the legislature imposed a fine of twenty pounds on the last owner of any freedman found begging in the city" (pp. 192-93).

Gotham inevitably gives rise to thoughts about histories of the metropolis. Not for the first time, a book that deals with the impact of business on cities makes me wish that more writers would address confrontations between classes rather than offer smorgasbord portrayals of admired, colorful, celebrated personalities, descriptions of magnificent, soaring, unique architectural achievements, and encomiums for world-famous, inspiring arts centers and art museums endowed by the rich who thus serve the masses. Struggles for power and class conflict are also what business history is about--in cities as well as within countries.

Notes:

[1]. For accounts of life in New Amsterdam, see Carl Bridenbaugh. *Cities in the Wilderness: The First Century of Urban Life in America, 1625-1741*. (New York, 1966); J. Franklin Jameson, editor. *Narratives of New Netherland, 1609-1664*. (New York, 1909).

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