

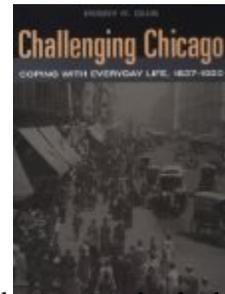
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Perry R. Duis. *Challenging Chicago: Coping with Everyday Life, 1837-1920*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998. xiii + 430 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-02394-1.

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As the nineteenth century neared the mid-century mark, the pace of urban growth quickened. In the years following the Civil War rapid social, cultural, technological, and economic changes drew increasingly larger numbers of people and industry to the nation's urban centers. As did its counterparts in other sections of the country, Chicago underwent the transformation from the walking city of the early nineteenth century to the metropolitan community of the twentieth. Chicagoans struggled to adjust and by the 1920s a range of strategies had been employed to cope with the challenges associated with urban life.

Perry Duis turns our attention away from the more well traveled stories of political change, industrial order, labor organization, and institutional growth to the dense and gritty milieu of urban life. Focusing primarily on the experiences of lower and middle class urban dwellers, Duis relates a series of vignettes that provide a human face and feelings to the more seemingly neutral processes that framed their lives. In so doing, he takes his readers into a world both foreign and familiar.

Originating out of columns written for *Chicago* magazine, entitled collectively *Chicago As It Was* as well as selections written for *Chicago History*, *Challenging Chicago* represents far more than the sum of its parts. In preparation for this volume, Duis rethought and re-researched his material. The end result is a richly textured examination of urban life accessible to anyone interested in learning about the past.

Faced with a myriad of challenges, according to Duis, urban dwellers coped. They devised strategies that allowed them to survive. While not every attempt met with success, spur of the moment decisions, planned actions, individual initiative, and group support all became part

of the arsenal of urban survival skills. Arguing that both the problems and the solutions grew out of the urbanization process, Duis examines a variety of ways that urban dwellers adjusted to city life during the years that the modern metropolis took shape.

Duis has divided his examination of urban life into six parts: "On the Move," "A Roof Overhead," "Food," "Spare Moments," "Hard Work," and "Avoiding Disaster." Each individual chapter, while focusing on the time period under discussion, concludes with a brief postscript that relates the material covered to the present. A conclusion weaves together the various stories Duis has explored and relates them more generally to issues of interest to students of urban life.

"On the Move" focuses on the challenges faced getting from one place to another. Moving people cheaply and efficiently around the nineteenth-century city represented one of many hurdles faced by urbanites as the nation's urban population exploded. A series of technological innovations ultimately offered those with some resources the opportunity to leave the crowded conditions of the old walking city. As populations and industry pushed outward, the city underwent a sorting process and a more segmented land use pattern emerged. Duis explores this process of differentiation and relates it to Chicago.

Following his discussion of intracity movement, Duis examines the interplay of centrifugal and centripetal forces inherent in the process of urbanization. He focuses on suburban development and the commuter. Suburban rail service and the automobile sped the process of population dispersal and, by the 1920s, Chicagoans not only moved around the city more easily but also traveled from the center to the periphery with regularity. Chicagoans

experienced more options for work and home as well as greater freedom of movement. However, such mobility came with a price. Each advance, Duis notes, brought with it new challenges as “someone’s solution became someone else’s problem” (p. 61).

As residents pushed for and adapted to new transportation technologies, Duis discovered, they found it necessary to think about the notion of place in more precise terms. As each succeeding thoroughfare etched itself upon the landscape, questions related to its use became important. Who had access to them? What costs were involved in their upkeep and who should pay for them? Increasingly, Duis suggests, Chicagoans saw their city as “a corporate social entity in which everyone had a stake in the common environment of the public place” (p. 2). In addition, Duis argues, they attempted to define place more precisely, by differentiating it according to use: public, semipublic, and private. By the end of Part One, readers have been treated to a very accessible introduction to the evolution of Chicago’s transportation structure and the ways in which semipublic spaces acted as areas of mediation, places where there existed both a physical and psychological adjustment to a variety of different urban challenges.[1]

In “A Roof Overhead” Duis explores the relationship between Chicagoans and their homes. Suburban subdivisions offered Chicagoans the opportunity to find greener pastures, social exclusivity, and greater security. May 1, Chicago’s traditional moving day, found renters on the move as they searched for a better building, a more affordable apartment, or any residence at all. Moving entailed not only people; it could also include the buildings themselves. In the midst of the shuffle, places such as Goose Island, lost out in the neighborhood sweepstakes and its inhabitants struggled to survive in a world that offered little hope. Stability and predictability, mobility and disruption, wealth and destitution marked the housing patterns of the Chicagoans who inhabit Duis’s world.

Surviving in the city not only meant having a roof over one’s head, however. Eating, the subject of Duis’s third section, also demanded the attention of Chicagoans. As the author points out, it was possible to survive, at least for a while depending on the season, without shelter. Food was another matter all together. Focusing primarily on the trade in food, ice, and milk, he weaves a tale about paradox and balance. Increasing centralization in freight transportation brought food into Chicago more quickly; congestion marked attempts to reroute the food once it arrived in the city. Public markets offered a

wide range of relatively fresh food for sale; these markets were often located just minutes away from those who could least afford to buy the food. Survival demanded pure food supplies, thus forcing a level of trust between suppliers and consumers. Yet, it was often necessary to bring in the power of the state to regulate the food available to both suppliers and customers. In this case, coping for the larger good meant relying on an institution with the power to impose order when other, more informal, means failed.

The fourth section, “Spare Moments,” is the least cohesive of the six. While both chapters comprising this section deal with making use of leisure time, the intent of the activities covered differ dramatically. “Reducing Risk and Taking Control” examines the drive to improve personal health and fitness. Exercise, bicycling, and anti-smoking crusades focused on the individual and his or her interest in good health. At times, individual decisions had societal consequences when, as Duis indicates, “one person’s coping brought conflict with another Chicagoan’s efforts to deal with city life” (p. 201), as was the case, for example, with the anti-smoking crusade.

Entertainment at its most broad is the concern of the next chapter, “Amusements, Crowds, and Morals.” After highlighting some of the more popular pastimes of nineteenth century urban Americans, including dime museums, beer gardens, dance halls, and amusement parks, Duis explores the ways in which these opportunities to unwind captivated some Chicagoans and concerned others. Entertainment destinations changed because of specialization within the industry, concerns over morals, and changing tastes. Crowds, choices, and enticements remained. According to Duis, such activities were a reaffirmation of urban culture with their emphasis on the crowd and congestion. What would make this selection even more interesting is greater consideration of how these entertainment venues parodied urban life, making it less threatening and more inclusive as well as, perhaps, easier with which to cope.

Unlike most studies of Chicago which focus on workers, Duis concentrates on the process of looking for work and attempts to improve one’s condition in life rather than on union, work place, or strike-related issues in his section on work. A variety of forces, including the shift from a market to industrial economy and the immigration of rural folks

unfamiliar with urban as well as factory life, could make finding a job and moving ahead in the world difficult. When organizing figures into his story, it appears

as the efforts of African American waiters to navigate the world of work with pride and dignity under conditions that virtually excluded those two concepts. What underlay all of these efforts were decisions to accept risk and insecurity when necessary and make use of those private and public institutions available to nourish and sustain a desire to improve.

“Avoiding Disaster,” Duis’s final section, analyzes ways in which the working poor attempted to minimize the gap between income and expenditures and examines the institutions available when an individual’s coping strategies failed. If one’s paycheck did not stretch as far as it needed to, Chicagoans could go to a variety of places for help. The pawnshop, loan shark, savings and loan, and benevolent organizations all provided a measure of immediate relief. The question facing the borrower revolved around the price he or she was willing to ultimately pay for this convenience. Living on the margins, in what Robert A. Woods and Albert J. Kennedy called the “Zone of Emergence,”[2] meant walking a tightrope strung between fiscal disaster and relative financial stability.

Not everyone, however, was able to stay afloat or master the necessary survival skills. These Chicagoans found themselves at the mercy of institutions created as a result of the belief that Chicago, as a “corporate social entity” (p. 2), bore some responsibility to address the needs of those in extreme want or of danger to society. Institutions such as Cook County Hospital, Dunning, and the Bridewell (House of Correction) were not designed to become havens for the outcast or mismanaged traps only associated with punishment, despair, and discrimination. Could their reputations encourage the honing of survival skills that would render these institutions unnecessary? Duis, as well as their history since the 1920s, give mixed signals.

Why did Chicagoans need to cope? According to Duis, distance, time, risk, and differences fostered the development of a “multifunctional place” (p. 354) in which urban residents negotiated the contradictions inherent in trying to balance the overlapping large and

small worlds that comprised their universe. For Duis, the coping mechanisms included escape, tolerance, adaptation, and change. Other historians would add imagination discourse[3] or reconceptualization.[4] The ultimate goal of all these strategies was to exert control over the environment and render it more understandable and livable.

In many respects, *Challenging Chicago* provides much more than it initially promises. Duis clearly is interested in making this dynamic period in the city’s development accessible to the curious reader. His narrative structure allows for an intriguing interplay between theory and anecdote, between process and specificity. Shortcomings exist; more attention, for example, could have been paid to the recent literature on public space and civility. As any good history book should, however, *Challenging Chicago* informs the interested reader as well as the more serious scholar and part of its strength rests in the way it encourages the reader to explore another time and place.

Notes:

[1]. Diane Barthel, *Historic Preservation: Collective Memory and Historical Identity* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 45-46, 132.

[2]. Robert A. Woods and Albert J. Kennedy, *The Zone of Emergence*, edited by Sam Bass Warner, J. (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1962).

[3]. Carl Smith, *Urban Disorder and the Shape of Belief: The Great Chicago Fire, the Haymarket Bomb, and the Model Town of Pullman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

[4]. Patricia Mooney Melvin, *The Organic City: Urban Definition and Neighborhood Organization, 1880-1920* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1987).

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