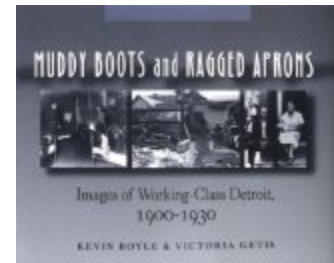


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Kevin Boyle, Victoria Getis. *Muddy Boots and Ragged Aprons: Images of Working-Class Detroit, 1900-1930*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997. 208 pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8143-2482-0.

Reviewed by Victoria W. Wolcott (St. Bonaventure University)
Published on H-Urban (June, 1999)



Images of the Motor City

In a society that considers itself “post-industrial,” it takes a tragedy like the recent explosion at the Ford River Rouge Plant in Detroit to remind us of the human dimension of America’s continued industrial production. In *Muddy Boots and Ragged Aprons*, Kevin Boyle and Victoria Getis likewise focus on the human component of industrial life through images of working people and the spaces they inhabited. This innovative collection of photographs sits on the border between a coffee table book and a scholarly collection of primary sources. While written for a general audience, it provides an invaluable resource for historians and teachers of urban America.

Boyle and Getis introduce the book with a narrative of how immigration and industrialization transformed Detroit’s landscape and economy in the early decades of the twentieth century. This narrative is written in an accessible style for non-specialists, but also reflects recent historical work that emphasizes the connectedness of work, leisure, and home in the lives of working-class Americans. Boyle and Getis also emphasize the unique character of Detroit among America’s industrial cities. In particular, the relatively high rate home ownership and the dominance of the automobile industry shaped the city’s geography and its inhabitants’ life-ways. The authors are careful to distinguish the unique institutions and histories of the city’s ethnic and racial groups: the Polish-American’s local saloon contrasts with the African-American storefront church. One omission weakens the introduction. A map illustrating the neighborhoods dominated by these groups would assist

the reader not familiar with Detroit’s landscape and help one visualize the proximity of working-class neighborhoods to the factories in which they worked. Such a map could also be consulted when the reader examines specific photographs in the body of the book.

The photographs are divided into three sections: home, work, and community. The first section, “Home,” may hold the greatest interest for urban historians. The authors draw largely from never-before-published photographs taken by Ford Motor Company’s Sociological Department to evaluate whether workers should receive the coveted five-dollar-a-day wage. Each photograph is accompanied by text providing background material and giving the authors’ interpretation of the image. These analyses are often illuminating, drawing one’s eye to a previously unnoticed child’s toy, religious figurine, or other detail. A few interpretations seem somewhat farfetched, as in the photograph where chairs dispersed around a room are said to reflect a lack of camaraderie among working-class boarders. In this section, and throughout the book, the authors are careful to note the gender dynamics of working-class lives as the interiors of homes crowded with boarders and families, the domain of wives and daughters, are given equal attention to the workplaces of men.

In the section on work, Boyle and Getis are careful to illustrate not only the factory floor so central to our image of industrial Detroit, but the service and leisure work which complemented the industrial economy. In addi-

tion, they provide photographs depicting the construction of a city in a period of rapid economic growth. The photographs of industrial workers nicely illustrate the transformation of the automobile industry from a period when skilled workers assembled wooden frames, to the brutally efficient assembly line. The final section, "Community," contains some of the most intriguing images in the book. As opposed to the more staged photographs taken by Ford, many of these photographs are taken by city residents who capture "accidental" images of daily life in working-class Detroit. These images depict the ethnic and racial enclaves that defined the urban geography of Detroit as settlement houses, churches, and shops serviced particular groups of immigrants and migrants. The images that end the collection are from the Great Depression which, as the authors suggest, marked the end of thirty years of rapid growth and vitality. Such images also presage the devastating impact of deindustrialization in the post-war decades.

By combing Detroit's archives for these rare images of daily life in early-twentieth-century Detroit, Boyle and Getis have provided a valuable service to urban historians. Their willingness to analyze these photographs,

whether or not one agrees with each interpretation, is both helpful and innovative. Historians may want to remove this book from the coffee table and bring it into the classroom, sharing with students images of small wooden homes filled with the belongings of immigrant boarders, children playing on tenement streets, and workers struggling with the increasingly mechanized factory floor. Teachers could ask students for their own interpretation of the images before providing the available background information. By compiling and analyzing a unique set of photographs, I am hopeful that Boyle and Getis have set a precedent that other historians will follow. Putting a human face on working America enhances our understanding of the consequences of urbanization and industrialization in the past, as well as today.

Review commissioned by Georgina Hickey <ghickey@gsaix2.cc.gasou.edu>, Georgia Southern University

Copyright (c) 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@H-Net.MSU.EDU.

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

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-urban>

Citation: Victoria W. Wolcott. Review of Boyle, Kevin; Getis, Victoria, *Muddy Boots and Ragged Aprons: Images of Working-Class Detroit, 1900-1930*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. June, 1999.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3124>

Copyright © 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.