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Huddled Masses and Their Hero

By Robert K. Landers

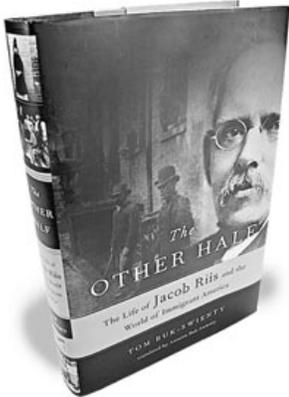
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The Other Half

By Tom Buk-Swienty

(Norton, 331 pages, \$27.95)

On a rainy October night in 1870, less than five months after his arrival in New York from Denmark, 21-year-old Jacob Riis found himself by the Hudson River. Homeless and hungry, cold and wet, without work or any prospect of it, and still pining for the Danish girl who had rejected him, he contemplated suicide. He was saved not by an angel, as in "It's a Wonderful Life," but by a dog that had followed him around ever since they shared the shelter of a doorway one cold night. The dog now pressed its wet and shivering body against his. "As my hand stole mechanically down to caress it," Riis recounted in his 1901 autobiography, "The Making of an American," "it crept upon my knees and licked my face, as if it meant to tell me that there was one who understood; that I was not alone." Riis snatched up the dog and fled from the river's temptation.



He found refuge around midnight in a lodging available to tramps (but not their dogs) at the Church Street police station. Awaking in the middle of the night to discover that his locket with a curl of the Danish girl's hair had been stolen, Riis complained to the sergeant in charge, only to be accused of being a thief himself and ejected from the station. When the dog, waiting patiently outside, saw the man at the door throw Riis out, it attacked, fastening its teeth on the man's leg. Yelling in pain, the man seized the dog and "beat its brains out against the stone steps." In a blind fury, Riis hurled paving stones from the gutter at the police station -- to no avail. But Riis would not forget, and the day would eventually come when he would avenge that dog.

Jacob Riis (1849-1914) today has several claims on our attention. He was the author of "How the Other Half Lives" (1890), a classic account of urban poverty on lower Manhattan's East Side. As a police reporter in the 1870s and 1880s, he became familiar with the overcrowded, ill-ventilated, unsanitary tenements and their disease, crime and child labor. He was a close observer of their huddled masses of Italians, Russian and Polish Jews, Germans, Bohemians and Chinese. He was not free of prejudice ("Money is their God," he wrote of the Jews, for instance), but his harsh stereotypes were often balanced by positive observations. There is no doubt he was on the side of the "honestly poor," whatever their race or ethnic origins. The reporter evolved into a reformer. Working with New York Police Commissioner Theodore Roosevelt, Riis succeeded in getting the city to tear down the worst of the tenements; and working with other reformers and charitable organizations, he sought to improve the lives of the struggling poor.

Riis also gained posthumous fame as a photographer. He himself thought he was "no good at all" at taking pictures, but posterity judged otherwise when it discovered the hundreds of photographs that he (and his associates) had taken of the people of New York's tenements. Readers of the best-selling original edition of "How the Other Half Lives" saw only muddy halftone images and anodyne woodcuts. But more than a century later -- thanks to many

volumes of faithful reproductions -- Riis's photographs have come to rival his writings in evocative power and historical importance.

With "The Other Half," Tom Buk-Swienty, a former U.S. bureau chief for a Danish newsmagazine, gives us a fresh look at Riis that draws on Riis's diary and other neglected sources. (The book was originally published in Danish and is translated here by Annette Buk-Swienty, the author's wife.) Mr. Buk-Swienty sees Riis's life as "primarily a story of love," not only for the Danish girl, who eventually did agree to marry him, but for his idealized hometown of Ribe, in southwestern Denmark. His affection for the site of his happy childhood, Mr. Buk-Swienty says, "inspired his philanthropic work and his compassion for others," whose environs lacked what Riis called "the neighborhood feeling, the *home* feeling."

The "other half" of which Riis wrote was actually in 1890 not *half*, but *three-fourths* of New York's population, 1.2 million people living in 37,000 tenements. The number of tenements and of their impoverished inhabitants had more than doubled since Riis's arrival in the city in 1870. (Mr. Buk-Swienty mistakenly reports that the doubling occurred over a single decade.) A staunch Christian, Riis was, as Mr. Buk-Swienty puts it, "a typical Victorian moralist." He distinguished between the deserving "honestly poor" and undeserving "paupers" and "tramps." And he recognized, as he himself wrote, the difficulties of giving money to the poor "without perpetuating the problem it is sought to solve, by attracting still greater swarms."

Mr. Buk-Swienty evidently regards such a viewpoint as outmoded, superseded by the "modern and holistic outlook on the problem of poverty," as, presumably, reflected in the Danish welfare state. But the Victorian outlook in fact remains pertinent, as shown by the serious critiques of welfare dependency that led to America's 1996 welfare-reform law.

A century before that law, in February 1896, acting on Riis's advice, Roosevelt closed all the police lodging houses, with their explosive mixtures of rough cops and homeless men. Provision was made for the displaced homeless on a barge in the East River until "the tramps" could be distinguished from "the unfortunate," Riis wrote in his autobiography. "The tramps for whom New York had been a paradise [then] betook themselves to other towns not so discerning . . . and the honestly homeless got a chance."

The closing of the police lodging houses was not the only important victory that Riis won in his battle against New York's slums, but it had a special savor for him: It was vengeance for the killing of his faithful little companion a quarter-century before.

Mr. Landers, a writer in Arlington, Va., is the author of "An Honest Writer: The Life and Times of James T. Farrell."

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