

## How Ordinary People Built Early Gotham and Its Workforce

*Greater Gotham: A History of New York City From 1898 to 1919*, by Mike Wallace  
(New York: Oxford University Press, 2017)

Reviewed by Alan Singer

**G**reater Gotham: A History of New York City From 1898 to 1919 is volume 2 of a series. Volume 1, *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898* (1999) by Edwin Burrows and Mike Wallace, was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in History. That book started in the early 16th century and spanned almost 400 years of history in 69 chapters and over 1200 pages. Volume 2 covers a little more than two decades in 24 chapters and over a thousand pages. Both are reference books for quick look up rather than books to read straight through. The hardcover edition of *Greater Gotham* weighs five pounds.

Mike Wallace is the Distinguished Professor of History at John Jay College of Criminal Justice and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. His original collaborator on the Gotham project, Edwin Burrows, a Professor of History at Brooklyn College- CUNY, died in 2018 and is not credited here, possibly because Burrows' area of historical expertise was in the earlier historical period.

In the introduction, Wallace explains that the book is organized to present the history of New York City, starting with the consolidation of its five boroughs into one metropolis in 1898, through five "vantage points," starting with a global perspective and ending with a "ground level" look at the people of the city.

The first vantage point is the global role of New York City as it moves "from the edge to the center of the world" to become an economic super-power "poised to wrest the financial leadership of the global capitalist system from London" by the end of World War I (10). Vantage point 2 examines the relationship between New York City and the United States as a whole as it emerges, in Wallace's view, as the unofficial capital of the country. It is the largest city in the United States, located in the state with the most electoral clout, and with large industrial, financial, and cultural sectors. Vantage point 3 chronicles the growth of the physical city itself and a real estate boom in response to its new prominence while vantage point 4 recounts the response of the city to cyclical economic booms and busts. The final vantage point is a close-up look at the people of New York themselves as they work, struggle, play, pray, parade, and propagate. This last vantage point interested me the most because among the people living in Greater Gotham

are both sets of my grandparents, Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe, and my father's older sister. My father, himself, was not born until 1920 and my mother until 1926.

Wallace and his collaborators, dozens of whom he thanks for their contributions, display an astounding understanding of the role geography, economics, and technology play in shaping history. There are chapters on housing booms in the outer boroughs, mergers, acquisitions, and the role of business leaders and bankers in making money but also in promoting the arts through philanthropy. Readers learn about the technology that makes possible the early New York skyline and its infrastructure of bridges, tunnels, roads, and rails. One area Wallace seems to slight are the city's water and sewage systems. There is a brief section on water (203-205) subsumed in a chapter on arteries where Wallace calls "Greater New York" a "thirsty super-city." Much of the section focuses on whether the water network should be privately or publicly owned and operated. There could be no Greater Gotham without water so the development of the reservoir system, the construction of the aqueducts, and the role of workers deserved greater attention. The vast sewage disposal system and the workers who built it get even less notice (217-218).

Part Three on Culture includes four different chapters, Acropoli, Show Biz, Popular Culture, and Seeing New York. Wallace didn't explain the term Acropoli, which I assume is the plural for the Athenian Acropolis, and he argues that Greater Gotham had multiple competing cultural centers because of class divisions and because of competition between elite upper-class cliques. The American Museum of Natural History became identified with the Roosevelts. Morgan and Rockefeller money patronized the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Tilden and Carnegie financed the public library system including the palatial central branch in Manhattan. Wallace discusses how Eurocentrism, though not identified as such, and racist ideologies impacted on the museum collections and the Bronx Zoo where an African pigmy was put on display in the Monkey House in 1906 (356-357).

For some reason, Wallace chose not to have a separate section on sports in an era when boxing, horse racing, and baseball were key components of popular culture. They were mostly discussed in a

section on gambling (615-631). The Polo Grounds in northern Manhattan, home of the New York Giants, opened in 1912 and Ebbets Field, home of the Brooklyn Dodgers, in 1913. Unmentioned is that the Giants were a dominant team, winning the World Series in 1905 while representing the National League, but losing, in 1911, 1912, 1913, and 1917. The Yankees, originally the New York Americans or the Highlanders, started playing in the city in 1903, but did not have their Golden Era until the 1920s after the acquisition of Babe Ruth.

Throughout the book we meet interesting historical characters. Emma Goldman addresses an 1893 anarchist rally demanding relief for the unemployed and is arrested for calling on the working class to eschew the electoral process and take to the street. Tammany head and State Senator George Plunkitt is the champion of what he calls "honest graft," while crime boss Edward "Monk" Eastman is the "interface" between the organized gangs of New York and Tammany Hall politicians. Motche Goldberg is the "King of the Vice Trust" operating eight houses of prostitution staffed by over one hundred unnamed women sex workers. Theodore Roosevelt is elected Governor, Vice-President and President, and is a soldier, outdoorsman, and museum patron. Clara Lemlich is a teenage Jewish immigrant from Ukraine who mobilizes garment workers and helps build the International Ladies Garment Workers Union. Both of my grandfathers were early members.

As the crossroads of the nation, New York City draws out-of-towners including temperance's Carrie Nation, muckraker Lincoln Stephens, investigative reporter Ida B. Wells, Irish labor leader James Connolly, and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, the "Rebel Girl." There is a sub-section on child labor (525-530) that includes the reform efforts of Florence Kelley and we have a photograph of the "Newsies" (528). But missing is Mary Harris "Mother" Jones, the "Miner's Angel," who led a 1903 children's march from Philadelphia to President Theodore Roosevelt's summer home in Oyster Bay to protest against the harsh conditions of child labor in textile mills.

*Greater Gotham* is more an encyclopedia than a book, but topics are not organized alphabetically for easier reference. As a book, a strength and a problem with *Greater Gotham* is that the chapters are thematic rather than being strictly chronological. This is a problem if you are trying to read *Greater Gotham* as a book, rather than use it as a reference source. However if you are interested in a specific topic, the consolidation of the city, development of the skyline, transportation, education, or crime, the sub-divisions work well. Given the amount of material and the emphasis on themes, I am not sure how *Greater Gotham* could have been structured differently.

In a sense, every reader has their own *Greater Gotham*. A *New York Times* reviewer argued that the prevailing theme of the book was consolidation, both consolidation of the city and consolidation of the political and economic power of the ultra-wealthy like J.P. Morgan and Cornelius Vanderbilt. That reviewer complained about "too much information," particularly "a hundred crowded

pages on the stories of a dozen strikes." Actually those are the stories I liked the most, the stories of ordinary people, mainly immigrants like my grandparents, and their children battling for decent working and living conditions. Most readers are their descendants, not the descendants of the Morgans and Vanderbilts.

A review on the NPR website clocked the book at over-6 pounds and 1,196 pages, either their scale or mine was off, and they counted all the reference and index pages at the end of the book. That reviewer was pleased that although "Dead white men are here, indeed, but they don't dominate," highlighting the role played by women in the growth of Wallace's *Greater Gotham* including Charlotte Perkins Gilman, an early feminist, Margaret Sanger, who championed health care for impoverished immigrant women, and the chanteuse Sophie Tucker. Although not mentioned in the review, Wallace's chapter on the Black Metropolis looks at migration to New York from the South and the Caribbean, northern Jim Crow, and what would become the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s. In August 1900 there was a white race riot (805-807) as African Americans were dragged off trolleys and beaten by white mobs. In 1901, W.E.B. Dubois published two articles in the *New York Times* on the "history and sociology of blacks in New York City." Wallace calls the articles "astonishingly insightful" (838). I know *Greater Gotham* was already too long, but I would have lived to have seen the articles quoted.

As a historian, I found the reference section difficult to use. Chapter 1 on mergers has 47 items listed alphabetically by the author's last name and I was unable to figure out which author was cited for which information. The bibliography was extensive and the index was divided into names and subjects.

I used volume 1, *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898*, extensively in my own writing on New York's complicity with slavery and as a resource for developing curriculum for teaching local history in secondary schools. I am now working my way through *Greater Gotham* searching for gems to include in lesson plans and waiting for future volumes to take the history of New York City up to the present. Thanks to Mike Wallace, I have already developed material for high school students using the DuBois *New York Times* articles.

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