



Constructing the Past

Volume 5 | Issue 1

Article 6

2004

The Photographs of Jacob Riis: History in Relation to Truth

Lauren Jensen

Illinois Wesleyan University

Recommended Citation

Jensen, Lauren (2004) "The Photographs of Jacob Riis: History in Relation to Truth," *Constructing the Past*: Vol. 5: Iss. 1, Article 6.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/constructing/vol5/iss1/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the History Department at Digital Commons @ IWU. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Constructing the Past* by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ IWU. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@iwu.edu.

©Copyright is owned by the author of this document.

The Photographs of Jacob Riis: History in Relation to Truth

Abstract

This article discusses the photographs and writing of Jacob Riis, who was instrumental in informing middle and upperclass people in the 1870's about the poverty and conditions in the slums. It suggests that Riis may have staged some of his photographs, and that he was not without bias in his reporting, but that his pictures and writing did help in charging the social reform movements.

The Photographs of Jacob Riis: History in Relation to Truth

By Lauren Jensen

Theodore Roosevelt said “[I]f I were asked to name a fellow-man who came nearest to being the ideal American citizen, I should name Jacob Riis.”¹ In the mid 1870s, Jacob Riis was the first social reformer to effectively address the middle and upper classes of New York regarding the problems of the slums and tenements in the city. His first hand explorations into the dwellings of the poor, accompanied by new capabilities of photography, helped to create an awareness in the city that previously had not existed. *If Riis was the ideal American citizen, and an immigrant himself, what did he think of the immigrants still in poverty?* Jacob Riis’s photographs, and portions of his texts, will be evaluated for their truthfulness as a judge of the tenements and the poor immigrants of New York from the late 1870s to the beginning of the 1900s. Historical truth will also be examined as it applies to my research and the case study of Riis.

In 1870, Riis arrived in New York from Denmark with little money to his name. He said that his experiences as an immigrant were similar to the people he photographed: “I reached New York with just one cent in my pocket, and put up at a boarding-house where the charge was one dollar a day.”² After years of odd jobs, wandering, and nights in lodging houses, Riis finally found a career in journalism. He was first an editor and owner of the *South Brooklyn News*, and then found employment as a police reporter with the *New York Tribune* in 1877, in between working for other news agencies on Newspaper Row. Riis recalled his time on Mulberry Street: “[A]ccordingly, I went poking about among the foul alleys and fouler tenements of the Bend when they [immigrants] slept in their filth, sometimes with the policemen on the beat, more often alone, sounding the misery and the depravity of it to their depth.”³ He lived in the neighborhood that he worked in and quickly recognized that the problems of the tenements, inadequate housing standards and poor ventilation and sanitation, needed to be addressed and remedied. Riis’s position as a newspaper editor and his personal views on poverty led to the beginning of his quest to expose the truth about slum life.

Historians have not documented and criticized Riis’s photographs extensively. In photography for example, information and evaluations of the images are in short supply. However, there are many critiques of Riis’s texts. Inevitably, a historian’s choice of information will be selective, and he or she will have to leave some information out but it does not mean that they exclude it entirely. In this case, the focus is on the photographs in relation to his texts.

How did Riis take the photographs though? Did he assume the identity of someone living in the tenements? One idea introduced by Eric Schocket was that of the “class transvestite” where “a number of white middle-class writers, journal-

¹ Jacob Riis, *The Making Of An American*, with an introduction by Theodore Roosevelt (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1925), xi.

² *Ibid.*, 31.

³ *Ibid.*, 153.

ists, and social researchers 'dressed down' in order to traverse with their bodies what they saw as a growing gulf between the middle class . . . and lower classes." ⁴ Schocket also conceived the notion that the authors used their bodies as a means to acquire knowledge and they used the experiences to make their experiment or adventure more authentic. ⁵ Moreover, once the authors underwent their excursion into the world of the "other," they made the realization that there is a common humanity among them all. ⁶ Riis realized this to some extent and furiously took up the cross of the suffering poor.

Discussing the stories of the lives of the people he encountered, Riis wrote: "[F]or it is as pictures from the life in which they and we, you and I, are partners, that I wish them to make their appeal to the neighbor who lives but around the corner and does not know it." ⁷ This was one of the causes that Riis championed; he wanted the rest of New York to know about the people living in the tenements. In 1890, Riis published his first book, *How The Other Half Lives: Studies Among The Tenements of New York*, with stories of the "other half" ⁸ which led to a career where he wrote about and documented the slums in books, lectures, and newspaper exposes. His personality inspired him to work towards progress, and he accomplished the building of parks, playgrounds, and eventually, the Jacob A. Riis House. He stressed the need for health codes, clean water, sanitation, social legislation, and other community ordinances. Since Riis was an early muckraker, he thought what better way to show the upper and middle classes poverty than with photographs. ⁹

An old saying goes "a picture is worth a thousand words," but the question with Riis's photographs is, "what do the pictures *say* about the situation in a thousand words?" If his photographs of Mulberry Bend, Bandit's Roost, and lodging rooms could talk, historians today could learn more from them. However, they can not. A historical problem arises because Riis was a historian too. Are his pictures unbiased and completely truthful? It is highly unlikely. Riis' purpose or an agenda was to persuade the middle and upper classes of New York that reform was needed. We will never see the "photos" that Riis passed up and did not take. He simply wanted to document the slums and expose people to them: "'I had use for it,' Riis wrote of the camera, 'and beyond that I never went.' . . . What mattered was not aesthetics but what the pictures showed. Riis had a similar use for words and statistics. . . . They were merely tools to persuade New Yorkers to witness what was right in front of their eyes." ¹⁰ It is not that he always chose the "worst" or most

⁴ Eric Schocket, "Undercover Explorations of the 'Other Half,' Or the Writer as Class Transvestite," *Representations* 64 (Fall 1998): 110.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, 111.

⁷ Jacob Riis, *Neighbors: Life Stories Of The Other Half* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1919), v-vi.

⁸ James B. Lane, "Jacob A. Riis and Scientific Philanthropy during the Progressive Era," *Social Service Review* 47, no. 1 (March 1973): 32. This phrase was coined by his good friend in Tammany Hall, Theodore Roosevelt.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Verlyn Klinkenborg, "Where The Other Half Lived," *Mother Jones* 26, issue 4 (Jul/Aug 2001): [2].

difficult situation or family to photograph, but it certainly helped his case if when they solicited pity and sympathy from the readers who viewed them.

Despite this idea, Riis's photographs are valuable historical evidence that can lead to the detection of historical truth. Apparently, Riis was not the most professional or the best photographer. He explained how his interest in photography came to be. "It was never that [it was a pastime] with me. . . . I am downright sorry to confess here that I am no good at all as a photographer, for I would like to be. The thing is a constant marvel to me, and an unending delight."¹¹ Scholar Peter Hales disagreed and he suggested that the texts Riis wrote to complement his photographs were part of "rhetorical games with his audience, in order to intensify the power of his photos . . . [and made] Riis' self-portrayal as the clumsy amateur photographer . . . highly effective . . ."¹² Riis continued to say, "I wrote, but it seemed to make no impression,"¹³ so he turned to photography to convey his message. He valued his photographs as a means to an end and most of the time did not pay attention to subtleties.¹⁴ Dan Gilgoff called him an amateur, perhaps because he set two buildings on fire and almost blinded himself in another incident¹⁵, while others, like James Dougherty and Roger Hall, interpret Riis's pictures today as "art."¹⁶ Here again is another dilemma of historical truth – the fact that there is room for interpretation. Just as one may see a photograph or block of text as one thing, someone else can see it as another.

As a police reporter, Riis had the opportunity to accompany law enforcement and members of the Health Department on raids of the tenements at night. Riis was surprised and content with the results of the switch from night to day: "The time came at length when I exchanged night work for day work, and I was not sorry."¹⁷ From this point, Riis gathered a lot of his information on the immigrant groups during the day and proceeded to take pictures at night once the technology was made available with flashlights.¹⁸ Riis, sometimes accompanied by members of the police force, made late night expeditions into tenements so that he could capture photographs of the poor. Recalling the experience of one such raid he said: "In one instance two rooms that should at most have held four or five sleepers were found to contain fifteen, a week-old baby among them. Most of them were lodgers and slept there for "five cents a spo.t"¹⁹ Riis illustrated this and

¹¹ Riis, *Making American*, 172.

¹² Bill Hug, "Walking the Ethnic Tightwire: Ethnicity and Dialectic in Jacob Riis' *How the Other Half Lives*," *Journal of American Culture* 20, issue 4 (Winter 1997): [4].

¹³ Riis, *Making American*, 173.

¹⁴ Bonnie Yochelson, "The Masked Image: Recapturing the Work of Reformer Jacob Riis," *Humanities* 19, issue 3 (May/June 1998): 17.

¹⁵ Dan Gilgoff, "Shedding Light On Dark Corners," *U.S. News & World Report*, 9/7/2001-16/7/2001, 53.

¹⁶ James Dougherty and Roger Hall, "Jacob Riis: Citizenship and Art," *Canadian Review of American Studies* 22, issue 3 (Winter 1991): [3].

¹⁷ Riis, *Making American*, 157.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 174 and 176. In those days, flashlights were enclosed in cartridges that were fired from a revolver.

To prevent tenement dwellers from running away, even though many did, Riis substituted a frying pan for a revolver and then proceeded to flash the light on that.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 177.

other experiences in his books. *How The Other Half Lives* and *The Battle With The Slum* both contained photographs and illustrations that were the result of his forays into the alleys of New York City. Riis lived in and mainly worked in Mulberry Street where "The Bend is a mass of wreck, a dumping-ground for all manner of filth from the surrounding tenements. . . . The numerous old cellars are a source of danger to the children that swarm over the block. Water stagnating in the holes will shortly add the peril of epidemic disease."²⁰ It is not surprising that many of his photographs and stories document the area .

David Jacobs, an art professor at the University of Houston, said that "Riis's images are so powerful because they are so ugly."²¹ This is true. Not until *The Battle Of The Slum* was published were there simple photographs which showed children playing in Kindergarten, or on roof gardens while receiving some, if not the best, education. However, most of Riis's pictures were not simple affairs. They were aimed at conveying the Bend and other alleys as places full of corruption and crime, where they lacked sanitation and clean air and water. Verlyn Klinkenborg said that "Even the grimmest of Riis's photographs show only a few people, at most, in the back alleys and basement dives. Powerful as they are, these pictures fail to convey the simple tonnage of human flesh in those dead-end blocks."²² In "It costs a Dollar a Month to Sleep in these Sheds," Riis exhibited this criticism. The mother with child is standing in front of the sheds in the alley, with three men sitting on her right, but plenty of space is shown in the forefront of the photograph. The reader wonders how crowded the area is, but it clearly illustrated the inadequate living conditions.

"If Riis – or his persona – seems at first glance to be simple, straightforward, even ingenuous," Bill Hug contends that "his stance becomes, upon closer investigation, ambiguous contradictory, [and] ultimately dialectical."²³ Even though Riis's pictures served to document the foul conditions of the slums and were praised at the time of their publication, today many historians and writers criticize the work he did. Some charged that he manipulated his pictures by having the poor pose for him. In an article in *USA Today*, Leslie Nolan wrote: "In some of his photographs, for example, young boys huddle over a ventilation grate as though it is their only refuge against the cold. A few can be seen smiling slyly at the camera, knowing that the picture is posed."²⁴ If the alleged pictures were posed, how historically accurate are they? The atrocious circumstances did exist, but in some cases, Riis may have exaggerated the image in the photograph to produce the support that he needed for his cause. Nolan continued to describe Riis's lectures: "local newspapers reported that his viewers moaned, shuddered, fainted, and even talked to the photographs he projected, reacting to the slides not as

²⁰ Ibid., 181.

²¹ Gilgoff, *Shedding Light*, 53.

²² Klinkenborg, *Where Other Half*, [3].

²³ Hug, "Ethnic Tightwire," [8].

²⁴ Leslie Nolan, "The Impoverished: A Century Apart In Pictures," *USA Today Magazine* 124, issue 2602 (July 1995), 85.

images, but as a virtual reality that transported the New York slum world directly into the lecture hall.”²⁵ In effect, he followed the post-modernists and wrote history so that it applied to his argument.

Other critics of Riis do not like the way that he acquired his photographs. Dougherty and Hall argue that “The photograph is ‘taken’, not requested, from a person whose unpreparedness is a condition of the picture’s claim to authenticity [sic]. And that person is thereby reduced to an object, an ‘other’ over whom the photographer has asserted his priority.”²⁶ They would agree that pictures, like “Five Cents a Spot,” reduce the humans in the image to mere victims. Interpreting his pictures as art allows them to say that this is a “rupture of the relation between subject and artist.”²⁷ Riis used tactics like these so that readers would identify with the people in the pictures, and the prints would trigger “more unsettling feelings – repugnance, fear, anger, [and] an urge to intervene.”²⁸ This was one of Riis’s goals; he wanted to upset the everyday life of a member of the upper or middle class and make them change the way they saw New York City.

Despite this, many still admire Riis for his subtle eye. Peter Conrad wrote, “[o]bjects which to the painter are images are to Riis evidence: an ash barrel on a sidewalk, dingy bedding draped on a fire escape, punctured sacks of refuse in Bottle Alley. These things . . . have not been pictorially composed, and their very randomness” makes them worthy photographs and pieces of art.²⁹ Riis wanted to appeal to the mind and the heart of his readers, instilling a moral response to the images. James Lane described Riis’s philosophy: “Riis’s fundamental concern was for the individual, the human being’s moral, ethical, physical, and intellectual development. He emphasized the overwhelming effect that an individual’s [poor] surroundings had in forming his personality and values.”³⁰ Appealing to readers’ hearts, Riis’s personal values could have conflicted with the history he wrote, and therefore, his writings present his biases, which is inconsistent with the goals of historical truth. “Viewers trained to aestheticize and sentimentalize the poor were inveigled into Riis’s pictures by the touching figures of mothers, children and families, or accosted by the stare of young toughs,” said Dougherty and Hall. Viewers also found “litter, paraphernalia, activity, and human presence” in every photograph.³¹ When Riis appealed to a person’s mind with inadequate living conditions, a heart-felt response was also invoked out of pity for the subject of the picture. His pictures “defeated the mechanism by which viewers could keep these human beings at any comfortable distance” and, because of his work, “reforms followed: slum clearance, building codes, sanitary requirements.”³² The

25 Ibid.

26 Dougherty and Hall, Jacob Riis, [3].

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid., [5].

29 Ibid.

30 Lane, “Jacob A. Riis,” 39.

31 Dougherty and Hall, Jacob Riis, [6].

32 Ibid.

viewers' moral certainties are called in question with the discomfort and apprehension they feel while looking at the photographs. Therefore, Riis can either be praised for his avid work as a social reformer or criticized for the methods he followed and used to achieve success.

Riis effectively used his pictures as evidence, but many historians criticize him for the way that he wrote about, not so much the photographs, but the immigrants in them. Today he has been called ethnocentric and racially prejudiced. Is this because the times have changed, or do his writings really reflect this charge? To clarify this point, one must take into consideration that at the time he was writing, the late 1870s to the 1900s, racial stereotypes and ethnic language were not part of a society that understood the values of diversity.

In regard to the ethnicity of the people that Riis was documenting, he seemed to accept ethnic stereotypes as true and then used the stereotypes to write about immigrants and their cultures, assuming that all Italians, Blacks, Jews, Irish, and other groups were the same. One example is Riis's photograph "In the home of an Italian Rag-picker." He captured "a picture that [was a] . . . reminiscence of Renaissance paintings of the Virgin and child."³³ Bill Hug recognized that Riis accompanied the photograph "with his blatantly condescending comment on Italian immigrant character." Riis said, "the Italian is gay, lighthearted and, if his fur is not stroked the wrong way, inoffensive as a child?"³⁴ Riis used an Italian stereotype, and the photograph accentuates the dignity of the person but degrades the woman with the animal reference.³⁵ *How The Other Half Lives* has numerous references to racial and ethnic stereotypes, and Riis seemed ignorant of them, but used the stereotypes regardless. The text in his books contradicts any objectiveness that he had as a reporter, photographer, and activist.

In addition to the Italians, Riis wrote in the same manner about Blacks and other immigrant groups. With this bit of evidence, it is recognizable that Riis had biases which appeared in his writings, whether he was aware of them or not. No one knows if he was conscious of the stereotypes that he developed in his texts, but it does prove how historians are challenged to present the truth based on facts. Historians strive to leave their own interpretations and biases out of the history they produce, but in Riis's case stereotypes and prejudices found their way into his writings.

In relation to historical truth, the photographs do transmit a sense of urgency to remedy the situations of people living in the tenements as well as accurately document the savage living conditions of immigrants in New York City. They vividly document the conditions. Riis's texts do include racially prejudiced language towards other ethnicities, for example the case of the Italian rag-picker, but the true strength of his prejudices remains speculation. On the other hand, he did

³³ Hug, "Ethnic Tightwire," [2].

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

take some photographs to show how each immigrant group lived in their own tenement community. In all,

Riis's photographs, effacing physical depth while encouraging his viewers to recognize the complexity of their own relationship to poverty, found a way to compel his viewers out of the comfort of their presumed otherness and to set them in the presence of the victimized: "This is how our fellow citizens live This is how we live."³⁶

When Riis was asked to write more books and to remain on staff at newspapers, he replied in his autobiography, "I shall do neither, for the good reason that I am neither poet, philosopher, nor, I was going to say, philanthropist; but leave me that. I would love my fellow-man. For the rest I am a reporter of facts. And that I would remain."³⁷ In effect, he aimed for the same goal that most historians have, to stick to the facts and keep the biases and prejudices of being a human being out of the way of writing history. Riis, however, fell short of this goal and his narrow-mindedness appeared in his writings. Unfortunately, writing history based on the facts, without personal biases, is a difficult task to accomplish but nevertheless, a superb goal to strive for.

*Due to copyright laws, we could not publish any of Jacob Riis' Photographs which were originally part of Lauren's Paper. Please visit The Photographs of Jacob Riis, Masters of Photography: <http://www.masters-of-photography.com/R/riis/riis.html>, for pictorial examples of Riis' work.

³⁶ Dougherty and Hall, Jacob Riis, [7].

³⁷ Riis, Making American, 273.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

- Riis, Jacob A. *How the Other Half Lives*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1903.
- _____. *Neighbors, Life Stories of the Other Half*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1919.
- _____. *The Battle With the Slum*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1998.
- _____. *The Making of An American*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1925.
- _____. The Photographs of Jacob Riis. Masters of Photography. <http://www.masters-of-photography.com/R/riis/riis.html>
- _____. The Photographs of Jacob Riis. Jacob Riis Gallery: Boise State University by Dan Huff. <http://www.boisestate.edu/socwork/dhuff/history/gallery/Gallery-JR/welcome-R.htm>
- _____. The Photographs of Jacob Riis. University of Virginia by Kay Davis, 2000. <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~MA01/Davis/photography/home/riis4.html>

Secondary Sources

- Dougherty, James, and Roger Hall. "Jacob Riis: Citizenship and Art." *Canadian Review of American Studies* 22, issue 3 (Winter 1991): [1-9].
- Gilgoff, Dan. "Shedding Light On Dark Corners." *U.S. News & World Report*, 9/7/2001-16/7/2001, 53.
- Hug, Bill. "Walking the Ethnic Tightwire: Ethnicity and Dialectic in Jacob Riis' *How the Other Half Lives*." *Journal of American Culture* 20, issue 4 (Winter 1997), [1-10].
- Kizis, Sarah. "One Writer Who Made A Difference." *Writing* 22, no. 6 (2000): 21.
- Klinkenborg, Verlyn. "Where The Other Half Lived." *Mother Jones* 26, issue 4 (Jul/Aug 2001): [1-7].
- Lane, James B. "Jacob A. Riis and Scientific Philanthropy during the Progressive Era." *Social Service Review* 47, no. 1 (March 1973): 32-48.
- Nolan, Leslie. "The Impoverished: A Century Apart In Pictures." *USA Today Magazine* 124, issue 2602 (July 1995), 78-87.
- Schocket, Eric. "Undercover Explorations of the "Other Half," Or the Writer as Class Transvestite." *Representations* 64 (Fall 1998): 109-133.
- Yochelson, Bonnie. "The Masked Image: Recapturing the Work of Reformer Jacob Riis." *Humanities* 19, issue 3 (May/Jun 1998): 16-21.