Focusing on a social reformer

A look at muckraking journalist Jacob Riis and his place in the history of photography

Rediscovering Jacob Riis: Exposure Journalism and Photography in Turn-of-the-Century New York
By Bonnie Yochelson and Daniel Czitrom
New Press, 268 pages, $35

By Louis P. Masur

In 1890, Jacob Riis, a New York journalist, published “How the Other Half Lives,” an examination of the urban poor who dwelt in the city’s tenements and slums. The book was a sensation, and it quickly became a classic of a new literary genre: muckraking journalism, work devoted to excavating and exposing society’s deepest and darkest social problems. The inclusion of 15 photographs made the book all the more dramatic. Readers could now see the hidden city for themselves.

In “Rediscovering Jacob Riis,” Daniel Czitrom, a historian, and Bonnie Yochelson, a former curator of prints and photographs at the Museum of the City of New York, examine Riis’ journalism and photos. Rather than offer a blended narrative, they each provide an essay that assesses the twin poles of Riis’ career.

Czitrom reminds us that at the time of Riis’ death in 1914, he was “a beloved public figure.” An immigrant from Denmark who rose to be friends with Theodore Roosevelt, Riis titled his autobiography “The Making of an American.” His path to upward mobility came from writing: “I really do think that journalism comes easy for me,” he confided to his diary. He worked for the South Brooklyn News, and in 1877 he took the position of police reporter for the New York Tribune. To help make a living, he also wrote feature stories for magazines. It was Scribner’s that first published his reports on life in the tenements.

Riis was not alone in his work, and Czitrom provides a clear account of the traditions upon which the journalist was drawing. He shows how Riis, a Methodist convert, relied more on a Protestant sensibility of uplift and salvation than any desire to document without moralizing. Riis also was familiar with the popular genre of “sunshine and shadow” guidebooks, which sold cheaply and offered to reveal the underside of the city.

What was changing was not the written but the visual. These books came with elaborate line drawings and ink sketches. And new camera technologies meant photos could convey a reality that words and drawings alone could not. The photos were displayed at public lectures, known as magic-lantern slide shows. In January 1888, Riis first presented “The Other Half, How It Lives and Dies in New York” before the Society of Amateur Photographers, and for two years he crisscrossed Northeastern churches and YMCA’s, showing nearly 100 slides and talking about urban immigrants and the poor who lived in wretched conditions.

Czitrom offers an insightful reading of “How the Other Half Lives” (note the title change from the lecture; death might not sell books). He shows how Riis was influenced by Felix Adler, the founder of the Society for Ethical Culture, and Charles Wingate, a journalist and member of the Tenement House Commission. He discusses Riis’ racial typol-
ogies, so characteristic of the age, and how he “draped the cultural mapping of exotic others in the metaphors of evolutionary biology”—social Darwinism.

Czitrom also shows that Riis believed that reliance on individual characteristics—thrift, hard work and discipline—combined with philanthropic good will would serve as the solution to the problem of the tenements. It was a stunning lay sermon, and it made Riis “the first muckraker and the first American social documentary photographer.”

But Yochelson disagrees, and unfortunately the co-authors do not directly debate one another. If Czitrom is intent on rediscovering Riis to appreciate him, Yochelson is intent on rediscovering Riis to debunk him. It bothers her that sometime after an exhibition of Riis’ newly discovered negatives and prints in 1947, he entered the histories as a pioneer of the photographic documentary tradition in America.

Yochelson wants none of it: Riis did not consider himself a photographer; his imagery was not new, “photographs had no meaning for him independent of his narrative,” “it was the Progressives, not Riis, who pioneered photojournalism.” She provides a complete history of the images—who took them (early on Riis brought photographers with him on his jaunts), how they were printed, when they were printed—and makes a point of telling us that no one at the time “suggested that the photographs were artistic or revolutionary.”

Yochelson, it seems, wants to restore Lewis Hine, the great Progressive-era social photographer, to first in line. Riis collected some of Hine’s photos, and Hine undoubtedly read Riis, but Hine certainly did something Riis never conceived: He told a story primarily through images rather than words.

For Riis, a journalist, the words may have come first, but the photographs were more than adornments. “How the Other Half Lives” was the first book to include photographic reproductions in the text, thanks to a new development known as the halftone process. It is difficult to exaggerate the revolution in visual culture this ushered in as photographic reality shaped and revealed everyday experience.

“Rediscovering Jacob Riis” includes dozens of stunning photos yet offers a deep reading of almost none of them. This failure by Czitrom and Yochelson unintentionally reinforces a naïve notion that photos offer an objective and truthful depiction of reality. Of course they do, and they simultaneously do not. They freeze moments in time, and our understanding of those moments needs to be examined in the light of how photos are produced, circulate and are read.

Take, for example, a picture that carries the title “Italian Mother” here but was called, “In the home of an Italian rag-picker, Jersey Street” in Riis’ book. It shows a woman in white, clutching a baby, her eyes gazing heavenward. A hat hangs on the wall above her head—a halo for this Madonna figure and child. Her basement dwelling is spotless—a dustpan sits foreground left. Filled with sharp con-
trasts and strong verticals (a ladder stands on the left), the image retains its power to move us.
Whatever their differing perspectives, Czitrom and Yochelson have done a service in returning the images to public attention. We gaze into the eyes of these 19th Century immigrant Americans and we feel for the hardships of the past and refocus on the struggles of today. Urban poverty remains a national blight. We await another Jacob Riis who, with camera and pen, can make the darkness visible and shock us anew.

Louis P. Masur is director of the American studies program at Trinity College in Hartford, Conn., and author of "The Soiling of Old Glory: The Story of a Photograph That Shocked America," due out in April.
In their book about Jacob Riis (above), authors Bonnie Yochelson and Daniel Czitrom offer separate essays that assess the reform-minded journalist’s career from different perspectives.
Photos like these of a woman holding a baby in 1889 (top) and a scrubwoman in 1892 showed readers of Riis' book and viewers of his magic-lantern slide shows the conditions in New York City's tenements and slums.