

James L. Phelan

Professor Peter Gibbon

The Origins and Development of the U.S. Constitution - Year 3

September 14, 2011

The Making of an American: A Book Review

The Book

When this book was recommended last summer, I jotted the title down and put an asterisk next to it then drew a heart around it. I don't remember which presenter suggested that it would be a good read. I do remember, however, hearing for the first time about the heartbreaking story of Jacob Riis and his pursuit of his childhood sweetheart. It was this romantic notion that moved me to draw the heart around the title. Riis' lifelong obsession with his childhood flame made an impression on me. Riis' pursuit would last into his adulthood before it would result in the fulfillment of his dream. The pursuit, also, would take Riis to the United States during a time when conditions were dangerously disgusting for the urban poor and for immigrants. Thus, what made Riis somewhat famous was his progressive

At times Riis' biography is laden with details that neither shed light on the circumstances nor move the plot forward. The introductory chapter is filled with vivid description of Riis' childhood home outside the city of Ribe in Denmark. When we find out that it is here he meets the girl who would become the love of his life, we realize that the details of Denmark are as etched on the mind of the author as the lines on Elisabeth's face.

After establishing his place of birth and the circumstances which brought him to the United States, Riis spends several chapters chronicling his experiences working in several jobs throughout

the states. Beginning with the chapter entitled “I Land in New York and Take a Hand in the Game,” Riis reflects on the immigrant experience. Upon arriving in New York Riis explains what he considers to be “a factor which is at the bottom of half our troubles with our immigrant population” (17). He blames the “loss of reckoning that follows uprooting; the cutting loose from all sense of responsibility...” (17). In other words, when people travel to places where they are not known, they become “creatures of their environment” (17). Among Riis’ jobs during his early years in the U.S. were coal miner, farm hand, and brick maker. Much to his dismay, Riis attempts to enlist to fight in the war. A series of attempts ends in miscommunications and even mistreatment from various consulates. Riis’ treatment as a Danish immigrant is a recurring theme throughout the book. Eventually, Riis lands a job as a police reporter in the slums of New York City. When the newly arrived technology of flash photography arrives from Europe, Riis harnesses it to enhance his written reports of crime in the slums of New York City. It is here that Riis begins to develop seriously his reformist platform.

In the chapter titled “Working and Wandering” Riis demonstrates just how far a man can get on little or no money. For years he wanders around the New York region looking for work, landing a job, getting down to his last pennies, wandering again, and finding another job. Despite the harsh and oppressive conditions, Riis never gives up hope that he will marry his love Elizabeth someday. Neither does he forget his family in his native Denmark. In one inspiring passage, Riis recalls his pastor’s voice from home urging him carry on.

I was on the road again looking for work on farm. It was not to be had. Perhaps I did not try very hard. Sunday morning found me spending my last quarter for breakfast in an inn at Lime Lake. When I had eaten, I went out in the fields and sat with my back against a tree, and listened to the church-bells that were ringing also, I knew, in my home four thousand miles away. I saw the venerable Domkirke, my father’s gray head in his pew, and Her, young and innocent, in the women’s seats across the aisle. I heard the old pastor’s voice in the solemn calm, and my tears fell upon her picture that had called up

the vision. It was as if a voice spoke to me and said to get up and be a man; that if I wanted to win Elizabeth, to work for her was the way, and not idling my days away on the road. And I got right up, and, setting my face toward buffalo, went by the shortest cut back to my work. (41)

Chapter titles that follow include “In Which I Become an Editor and Receive my First Love Letter,” “Elizabeth Tells Her Story,” “Early Married Life; I Become an Advertising Bureau; On the ‘Tribune’”. During this time, Riis discovers that Elizabeth has married and that her husband passes away. He receives a letter from her in which she declares her desire to marry Riis. With a new sense of urgency and vigor, Riis sets out to find ample work to save enough money to start a home with Elizabeth. After becoming the editor of the South Brooklyn News, he begins to develop his skills as a reporter. By a stroke of luck, his chief editor assigns Riis to be the head police reporter for the busiest district in New York City - The Mulberry Street district. Mulberry Street, located on the lower East Side of New York, housed most of the city’s slums. This would be the job that would thrust Riis to the forefront of newspaper reporters.

His raw descriptions of the filthy conditions of the slums of New York began to turn heads socially and politically. During his tenure at the Tribune, Riis hones his skills for reporting on the human condition as it applies to the slums. Furthermore, his work allows him to become somewhat of a champion for the poverty-stricken, many of whom were immigrants like himself. Riis enlightens the reader as to what drove him to start taking photographs of his subjects in a chapter titled “The Bend is Laid by the Heels,” which chronicles Riis’ employment as a police reporter. He first gets the idea while taking midnight trips with the sanitary police to check for overcrowding. “We used to go in the small hours of the morning into the worst tenements to count noses and see if the law against overcrowding was violated, and the sights I saw there gripped my heart until I felt that I must tell of them, or burst, or turn anarchist, or something” (107). Riis’ sketches and drawings were unsuitable. He laments his inability to draw, “I cannot draw, never could” (107).

Riis then meets a German who has revolutionized photography. Flash photography is just what Riis needs to capture the disturbing images he experiences with the sanitary police. He recounts the tale of one of his midnight runs where he found 15 people living in a tenement designed to hold 5 people. Mere descriptive words would never have made a solid enough case to the courts. When his description was accompanied by photographic negatives, the courts were persuaded to act. "I had, at last, an ally in the fight with the <Mulberry> Bend" (109). It would be the combination of journalism accompanied by dramatic photographs that would catapult Riis onto the lecture circuit. Riis had lectured before in his humble past. In the chapter "I Become an Author and Resume My Career as a Lecturer" Riis recalls his earlier attempts at lecturing. His lectures were attended by odd citizens, some of whom were interested in what he had to say on science, religion, and other things. Other audience members, however, were just bored or amused by Riis. He had been frequently heckled in those days. Now, though, his reformist platform had momentum. He became more and more an tireless advocate for improving the conditions of the most poverty-stricken neighborhoods of New York.

"Roosevelt Comes - Mulberry Street's Golden Age" is the chapter where Riis meets Theodore Roosevelt, the newly appointed Police President and advisor to then Governor Strong. Roosevelt was struck by Riis' zeal and passion. Riis shares that one day Roosevelt stopped by Riis' office at the Evening Sun to deliver a message. The note said that he had read Riis' latest book (How the Other Half Lives) and that he had "come to help" (131). As Roosevelt rose in stature, influence, and position, his bond with Riis became stronger. Riis became a trusted advisor to Roosevelt, allowing many reforms to take place which would improve the lives of the slum-dwellers of New York. Between his photo-journalism, his published books, and his reform lectures and political advocacy,

not only did tenement life improve, but for the first time New York City got a school census which allowed them to keep track of how many school-aged youths were on the streets.

Closing out Riis' story are the chapters "I Try to Go to War for the Third and Last Time," "When I Went Home to Mother," and "The American Made." As these chapters unfold, Riis becomes ever more nostalgic. He goes back and forth from telling his story to speaking in present tenses.

Roosevelt goes to Washington, Riis stays in New York City and passes away in 1914. Recently, two authors have attempted to re-interpret Riis' work, both photographically and journalistically. In "Re-Discovering Jacob Riis" co-authors Bonnie Yochelson and Daniel Czitrom undergo the task of reading Riis' works and adapting them to a 21st century audience. The fact that immigration, school reform, poverty, and sub-standard living conditions are still in the news today; and the fact that at least two people consider Riis' message worth "Re-Discovering" is a testament to the vision of the man. Fittingly, there is a quote of Theodore Roosevelt's from Riis' day that seems to follow Riis to this day - a sort of tag-line or motto. Roosevelt has said that he was tempted to call Riis "the best American I ever knew."

Teaching Jacob Riis

Although my curriculum does not include the period of time in which Riis became well-known, I do have plans to use pieces of this man's life to share with my students. One thing I have always been fascinated by is the power of photo-journalism. During my first year as a teacher I designed a unit for students with language development delays. The unit had students using the then new technology of disposable cameras to capture moments in their everyday lives. I would develop the photos and students would put together albums. They would then write narrative descriptions about

the photos. The albums became a sort of photo-journalistic diary. Students were engaged, motivated, and serious about capturing their subjects at interesting angles.

The one way I would use Riis in my U.S. History class today would be for students to take digital images of things in their community that they consider to be unjust or unfair. Perhaps students see someone illegally parked in a handicapped space. Perhaps they see a homeless person begging for money on the street. Whatever they see, they capture, print, and write about it. Years ago a colleague designed a social reform/ELA unit designed to get kids thinking about fixing what's wrong with their community. He called it "Writing Wrongs." This unit was what inspired students from Quincy to start a school in Pakistan in memory of the slain child labor opponent Iqbal Masih. Perhaps I will find a way for my students to utilize the photo-journalistic techniques Riis used to get his message across. Whether or not that happens, I have a new respect and admiration for Mr. Riis.