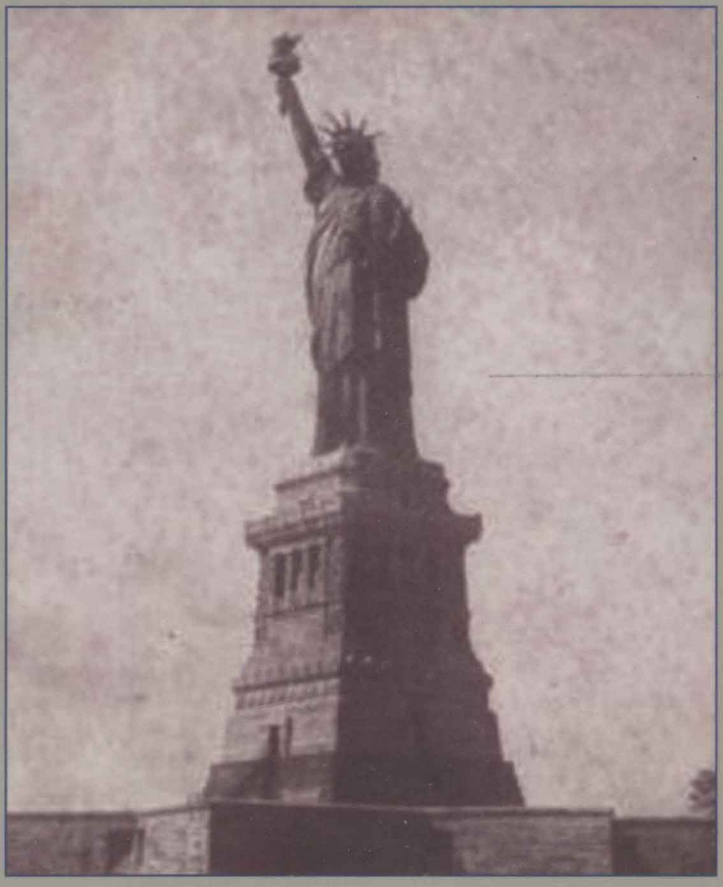
How the Other Half Lives

Jacob Riis



Edited by Hasia R. Diner

A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION

A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION

Jacob Riis
HOW THE OTHER HALF I

AUTHORITATIVE TEXT
CONTEXTS
CRITICISM

Edited by
HASIA R. DINER
NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

With photographs from the
Jacob A. Riis Collection
at the Museum of the City of New York

W • W • NORTON & COMPANY • *New York* • *London*

W. W. Norton & Company has been independent since its founding in 1923, when William Warder Norton and Mary D. Herter Norton first published lectures delivered at the People's Institute, the adult education division of New York City's Cooper Union. The firm soon expanded its program beyond the Institute, publishing books by celebrated academics from America and abroad. By mid-century, the two major pillars of Norton's publishing program—trade books and college texts—were firmly established. In the 1950s, the Norton family transferred control of the company to its employees, and today—with a staff of four hundred and a comparable number of trade, college, and professional titles published each year—W. W. Norton & Company stands as the largest and oldest publishing house owned wholly by its employees.

Printed in the United States of America
First Edition

The text of this book is composed in Fairfield Medium with the display set in Bernhard Modern.
Manufacturing by the Courier Companies—Westford division.
Book design by Antonina Krass.
Composition by Westchester Book Group.
Production manager: Eric Pier-Hocking.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Riis, Jacob A. (Jacob August), 1849–1914.
How the other half lives : authoritative text, contexts, criticism / Jacob Riis ; edited by Hasia R. Diner.—1st ed.
p. cm.—(A Norton critical edition)
Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN: 978-0-393-93026-9 (pbk.)
1. Poor—New York (State)—New York. 2. Tenement houses—New York (State)—New York. 3. Riis, Jacob A. (Jacob August), 1849–1914. How the other half lives. I. Diner, Hasia R. II. Title.
HV4046.N6R58 2009
305.5'69097471—dc22

2009015561

W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 500 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10110
www.wwnorton.com

W. W. Norton & Company Ltd., Castle House, 75/76 Wells Street, London W1T 3QT

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0

The Editor

HASIA R. DINER is Director of the Goldstein-Goren Center for American Jewish History and Paul S. and Sylvia Steinberg Professor of American Jewish History at New York University. She is the author of *We Remember with Reverence and Love: American Jews and the Myth of Silence after the Holocaust* (2009); also *From Arrival to Incorporation: Migrants to the United States in a Global Age* (co-editor); *The Jews of the United States, 1654 to 2000; Hungering for America: Italian, Irish and Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration; Her Works Praise Her: A History of Jewish Women in America from Colonial Times to the Present* (co-author); *Lower East Side Memories: Jewish Place in America; Erin's Daughters in America: Irish Women in the Nineteenth Century; In the Almost Promised Land: American Jews and Blacks, 1915–1935;* and *A Time for Gathering: The Second Migration, 1820–1880* (Volume 2 of *The Jewish People in America,* edited by Henry L. Feingold) and co-editor of *Remembering the Lower East Side: American Jewish Reflections.*

W. W. NORTON & COMPANY, INC.
Also Publishes

ENGLISH RENAISSANCE DRAMA: A NORTON ANTHOLOGY
edited by David Bevington et al.

THE NORTON ANTHOLOGY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE
edited by Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay et al.

THE NORTON ANTHOLOGY OF AMERICAN LITERATURE
edited by Nina Baym et al.

THE NORTON ANTHOLOGY OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE
edited by Jack Zipes et al.

THE NORTON ANTHOLOGY OF ENGLISH LITERATURE
edited by M. H. Abrams and Stephen Greenblatt et al.

THE NORTON ANTHOLOGY OF LITERATURE BY WOMEN
edited by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar

THE NORTON ANTHOLOGY OF MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY POETRY
edited by Jahan Ramazani, Richard Ellmann, and Robert O'Clair

THE NORTON ANTHOLOGY OF POETRY
edited by Margaret Ferguson, Mary Jo Salter, and Jon Stallworthy

THE NORTON ANTHOLOGY OF SHORT FICTION
edited by R. V. Cassill and Richard Bausch

THE NORTON ANTHOLOGY OF THEORY AND CRITICISM
edited by Vincent B. Leitch et al.

THE NORTON ANTHOLOGY OF WORLD LITERATURE
edited by Sarah Lawall et al.

THE NORTON FACSIMILE OF THE FIRST FOLIO OF SHAKESPEARE
prepared by Charlton Hinman

THE NORTON INTRODUCTION TO LITERATURE
edited by Alison Booth, J. Paul Hunter, and Kelly J. Mays

THE NORTON INTRODUCTION TO THE SHORT NOVEL
edited by Jerome Beaty

THE NORTON READER
edited by Linda H. Peterson and John C. Brereton

THE NORTON SAMPLER
edited by Thomas Cooley

THE NORTON SHAKESPEARE, BASED ON THE OXFORD EDITION
edited by Stephen Greenblatt et al.

For a complete list of Norton Critical Editions, visit
wwnorton.com/college/English/nce_home.htm

Introduction

On November 15, 1890, the publishing house Charles Scribner's Sons, released *How the Other Half Lives.* Based on a magazine article of the same title that had appeared the previous year in *Scribner's Magazine,* the book, written by a reporter who had already achieved a relatively high-profile local reputation, Jacob Riis, became an instant best-seller. This sensationalistic, yet deeply moralistic, expose of the squalid living conditions of New York's urban poor, "the other half," caused an immediate stir among socially conscious members of the better-off "half" for whom the author penned his words and took the forty-three pictures that accompanied the text. Almost immediately upon its publication, Riis's book held a premier place among a string of other contemporary works that sought to drive home to Americans, particularly those with influence and power in government and business, the imperative of addressing the problems of the poor in America's cities, specifically in its ever-growing immigrant enclaves. No one would, Riis asserted, start working for a solution without first being exposed to the faces and facts of the urban crisis. This book catapulted Riis from local to national visibility as he told Americans of the comfortable classes that if they did not tackle these problems, the problems would come back to haunt them.

How the Other Half Lives also occupies a premier place on a selective list of American books that, on hindsight, unmistakably changed public opinion, began the process of altering public policy, and left an indelible mark on history. The only book among these transformative works that preceded *How the Other Half Lived,* Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* of 1852, played a role in awakening antislavery sentiment among Northerners as it depicted "life among the lowly" and the tragic human price levied by bondage. Two and a half decades after Riis challenged Americans to consider the effect of urban crowding and the greed of landlords who insouciantly gouged the poor in their quest for profits, Upton Sinclair launched his scathing attack on the exploitation of the immigrant poor, while highlighting the lax conditions in the meatpacking industry in *The Jungle* (1906), which propelled the federal government to involve itself in regulating the quality of what Americans ate. Three books of the 1960s, in addition, take their places on this distinguished shelf of books that transformed Americans' consciousness and changed the ways they lived: Rachel Carson's *The Silent Spring* (1962), Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) and Ralph Nader's *Unsafe at Any Speed* (1965). These writers and their works did no less than jump-start the environmentalist, feminist, and consumer movements, which went on to transform American law, politics, and social practice.

Each of these books inspired readers to demand action from those who could rectify the evils chronicled in their pages. Subsequent to their publication, other texts, including books, speeches, sermons, essays, exhibitions,

and government reports, cited these volumes as conclusive evidence of the existence of a deep and profound problem that cried out for a solution. Later commentators would hail these books as the catalysts for broad public discussion and real political action. And, although all of these books had been preceded by other works that tackled the same problems, these particular texts captured public attention as none before, or after, had. All can be understood as having been the right book at, and for, the right time and as works that thoroughly galvanized the consciousness of their readers.

How the Other Half Lives appeared at a propitious moment. Looking backward, we see how it reflected much about the social gospel movement of the Gilded Age, which in heavily Protestant, evangelical tones, called on Americans to recognize that they had, or should feel as though they had, a connection to and responsibility for the increasing number of immigrants and other poor people who crowded into the industrial cities. Reformers of that era, whether writing with a Christian perspective or not, challenged the prevailing laissez-faire spirit, with its deep roots in America's national ideology that considered individualism as the only explanation for human success or failure. The long-standing American emphasis on very limited government had been strengthened in the 1860s and 1870s with the rise of social Darwinism, which claimed that in the natural order of things, those who could adapt would, while those who could not had to fall, plain and simple. Competition weeded out the weak, elevated the competent, and no amount of social tinkering could change natural processes.

Reform efforts of the post–Civil War era, like the social gospel movement, and Riis's book stood as rhetorical rebukes to William Graham Sumner's 1883 work, *What the Social Classes Owe Each Other,* in which the sociologist argued emphatically, nothing. Rather, Riis like the other socially conscious women and men of the late nineteenth century answered in the affirmative, declaring that, to the contrary, the classes owed much to each other.

The efforts of these individuals, like those of their counterparts in Great Britain, strove to convince the better-off that the problems of the city, its poverty, crime, disease, and political corruption, had left their mark on the upper classes as surely as they did on the dwellers of the slums and the tenements. Those with means had a role to play in rectifying these problems because the problems involved them as well.

Those who participated in this Gilded Age reform enterprise hoped to make the middle and upper classes aware of the breadth, depth, and anguish of poverty so they would voluntarily participate in projects to alleviate suffering. Such endeavors could be undertaken by church groups, clubs, other kinds of associations, and certainly by individuals, who could dip into their own pockets and give to the poor and to those in distress. They should, according to the reformist enterprise of the age, devote time to working with the poor and helping build bridges across the chasm that separated the social classes.

Riis drew much from that way of social thinking and reflected its thoughts about racial differences that had been inherited from the Enlightenment. Reformers asserted that changed and improved circumstances could alter, for the better, the basic character of the people who made up the various "inferior" groups at the bottom rungs of the social and economic ladders. Such a way of thinking about race ranked cultures and

groups along a continuum from better to worst, but Riis and others confidently expected that altered conditions could erase the worst traits of the deprived.

Riis inherited much of his vision from the earlier, highly moralistic yet optimistic ethos of the mid-nineteenth century, which assumed the absence of fixed types and which believed that individuals and society could change by good works. People merely needed to be shown the way. Riis had little doubt that some styles of living should be seen as superior to others and that on such matters as home life, leisure-time activity, and gender expectations, one could comfortably talk about good and bad, better and worse, acceptable and not. People like himself, those who knew the best way, had a responsibility to point it out to those who did not.

While Riis reflected much of the social gospel's underlying ideology, he did part company with it on a number of matters, as borne out in the pages of *How the Other Half Lives.* Unlike many of those who had preceded him or indeed some of his contemporaries, he did not encounter the other half with a goal of converting them to his religious vision. At a time when missionaries honeycombed the immigrant neighborhoods and combined outreach services to the poor with a clear message that Catholics and Jews would be well served by embracing Protestantism, Riis, despite his own religiosity and his admiration for many of the programs undertaken by churches, did not devote his text to trying to further the evangelical cause. This put him well in line with the emerging progressive paradigm.

How the Other Half Lives also took on much of the substance of this new turn in reform activism, which understood social problems in decidedly pessimistic ways and which demanded that the state become an active force in changing the circumstances of the other half. While clinging to the belief that individuals might be able to effect changes once their sensibilities had been heightened, Riis believed the law had to lead the way. Progressivism did not trust the good will of individuals to solve the escalating crises that beset society, nor did it assume that much goodwill existed in the first place. A degree of compulsion had to be added.

Riis in *How the Other Half Lives* also embraced new ways of thinking about race. He, like contemporary scientists and ethnologists, comfortably spoke about "Jews," "Italians," and "Bohemians," lumping all under a single-group rubric, seeing essentially no variation. Consistent with much of late-nineteenth-century rhetoric, this book refered without hesitation to "the Negro" and "the Chinaman," reflecting a tendency to consider individuals as exemplars of entire populations and entire populations as the bearers of particular habits, tastes, and patterns of behavior. Riis predicted that some groups would move up and others would not as a result of basic racial traits. This assessment of the effect of race and the fixed nature of "the group" emerged in force in the 1890s. The formation of the Immigration Restriction League in 1893 showed how white, affluent, native-born Americans had come to view the growing number of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe as a fundamental threat to American life. The League can claim credit for having inspired a movement that culminated in the 1920s with the passage of the National Origins Act, comprehensive immigration legislation that fixed the number of immigrants who could enter the United States in any year and assigned quotas to immigrants on the basis of nationality. Although Riis never called for restriction or joined with the nativists,

his assertions as to which groups would rise and which would not, which had admirable traits and which did not, fed into the xenophobes' triumph after the end of World War I.

In line with the spirit of the progressive era, conventionally dated by historians as beginning in 1890, the year of *How the Other Half Lives,* through the end of World War I, Riis placed a great deal of attention on the causative effect of physical spaces on character. The book, through words and photographs, first and foremost explored the world of the tenement and the tenement district. It fretted over the moral and health implications of fetid air, over the lack of greenery, over the absence of healthful places for children to play, and over the deleterious effect of crowding on those who lived in slums. It chided the cabal of landlords, crooked politicians, corrupt police officers, and saloon keepers who derived power and profit from the miserable circumstances of the men, women, and especially children forced to make their homes there. It drew a straight line from the filthy, overpopulated tenement apartments to the dangerous streets, to the grim asylums that warehoused the poor, and, ultimately, to the unmarked graves in Potter's Field, the final resting place, Riis believed, of those born of the slums.

Progressives as a group, like Riis, put much emphasis on the physical environment as a force in and of itself and went to great efforts to demonstrate graphically to the more comfortable classes the effect of degraded spaces on those who dwelled there. Conversely, progressives believed passionately in the ameliorative power of fresh air, the out-of-doors, trees, grass, and wide expanses of space for play. But, in lieu of shipping the poor to the countryside, something that had been tried at least for urban orphans by one of Riis's heroes, Charles Loring Brace, Riis and other urban progressives lobbied for the creation of parks and playgrounds in the slums, places that could counteract the dank and crowded apartments, the breeding places, as they saw it, of disease and criminality.

Normal and pure domestic life could not flourish in the slums, Riis and the progressives believed. These reformers put much emphasis on the family and had no doubt that an ideal family type, one resembling that of middle-class white America, existed as the standard against which to measure others and by which to assess the negative effects of the tenement environment.

The culture of the tenements and the streets around them destroyed families, as did that of the sweatshops, in which the poor labored, the saloons in which the men squandered their wages on drink, and the dives in which all sorts of temptations flourished. In the pages of *How the Other Half Lives* and in the flood of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century articles, books, exhibitions, and investigative reports, which constituted the public works of the progressive era, all social evils worked together to crush families under their weight.

Riis did not blame the poor for their circumstances. Earlier commentators who wrote about poverty asserted that the poor had only themselves to blame for their poverty. Many of Riis's contemporaries continued to consider that the poor bore responsibility for their own fate. They had made bad choices and as such suffered the consequences of their own actions. Riis never engaged in this kind of blaming the victims. He also disagreed with those who considered poverty to be natural and inevitable. The poor, many Americans assumed, would always be there.

Riis believed poverty and the congested tenements and unsanitary streets could be eradicated. He pointed his finger directly at the landlords who charged excessive rents, which fostered crowded apartments and created an environment in which diseases could run rampant, wrecking the bodies of the other half. Riis also blamed employers who, in their quest for cutting costs, subjected workers to oppressive conditions and failed to pay a wage that would allow men to provide decent housing for their families. He lambasted corrupt politicians and policemen for ignoring the actions of saloonkeepers who, he contended, spread their poison throughout the tenement district, eating away at the poor. Riis and other progressives worried particularly about how such conditions affected the children of the slums.

In Riis's writing, as in so much of the reform discourse of the era, the poor emerge as victims, unable to lift themselves out of squalid circumstances. He stressed the pathos of their lives, the high rate of infant mortality, the debilitating diseases, and the lives lost to crime and drunkenness. He wrote about how the hopes of immigrants seeking a better life in America died in the tenement districts.

Yet, however sympathetically he portrayed the other half, Riis, like many progressives, had no doubt that some ways of living deserved condemnation and others, praise. Riis's moral vision pervaded nearly every page of *How the Other Half Lives,* every vignette, and he comfortably set himself up as the arbiter of the right way. No cultural relativist, Riis boldly asserted that the poor could no more be trusted to know what to do with their children, as landlords, saloonkeepers, politicians, or the police could be left to their own devices. He and the others of the progressive crusade had the obligation to speak for the poor and help the middle class participate in stemming the crisis.

Riis's book and the voluminous corpus of his subsequent writings and public addresses all reflected the progressives' abhorrence of disorder. *How the Other Half Lives* pulsated with images of crowded and chaotic streets, jumbled apartments into which light could not penetrate, filthy saloons swathed in darkness, fetid alleys used for sleeping and the commission of violent crimes, and, finally, the horrors of the unmarked grave.

Riis and the progressives relied on the written word to let the comfortable classes know about the conditions of the poor and to convince them that, despite their distance from the tenement districts, they too would suffer if society did not eliminate poverty, congestion, and disorder. They showed through the recently launched field of statistics that crime would spread as would disease. Unrest among the poor could be manipulated by political agitators and lead to the crumbling of society. The multitude of progressive-inflected works, of which *How the Other Half Lives* early on became a key text, provided graphic portraits of the tragic lives of the urban poor.

This age of the social exposé went in tandem with the efflorescence of literary realism. In both Europe and America, writers such as William Dean Howells, Stephen Crane, and Émile Zola began to shift literature away from sentimentality, with its emphasis on uplifting portraits of noble and genteel lives, to a harsh emphasis on the facts of life, regardless of the discomfort the reader might experience. Indeed, the imaginative literature and the reform writings together hoped to inspire unease because such unease would mean that the reader had learned the truth.

The style and structure of Riis's work owed much to the emergence of photography in the decades after the Civil War. Technological innovations such as flashlight powder proved crucial to Riis and other progressives who documented the brutal reality of poverty by going into the streets, apartments, and workshops to capture the faces of the poor and the spaces of their suffering. So too the development of new kinds of lenses and more adaptable cameras brought about the birth of photojournalism in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Photography made it possible for Riis to accomplish his goal of showing people something otherwise hidden to them. To present his story to a wide audience, he needed more than words. The photographs Riis and the others took functioned as crucial companions to the texts and not as just as interesting illustrations.

The ethos that infused Riis's book reflected some of the basic details of his life, a spectacular success story. This immigrant came to the United States with no contacts to help ease his way, no capital with which to invest in his future, no obvious assets to give him a quick start as he tried to make something of himself. Yet by the time he died in 1914 he had achieved national, even international, renown and could claim, among other notables, President Theodore Roosevelt as a friend. Indeed Roosevelt wrote a laudatory introduction to Riis's 1900 autobiography, *The Making of an American*. To reciprocate, in 1904 Riis wrote a book-length biographical tribute to Roosevelt, who was seeking to win reelection to the White House.

Riis's life began in 1849 in Ribe, Denmark, as the third child of Niels and Carolina Riis. His father taught school and edited the town newspaper, including in his work principles that would make his son famous, such as placing tremendous importance on education as a tool to uplift the poor. An avid reader, Jacob particularly enjoyed the writings of James Fenimore Cooper, celebrant of the American wilderness, and Charles Dickens, whose bleak portrayals of urban poverty, albeit told in sentimental terms, may have awakened the boy's social conscience.

But all that lay in the future. Jacob arrived in the United States in 1870 on the steamship *Iowa*. His training as a carpenter seemed to have prepared him for little in his new home, and he spent the years from his landing until 1873 moving around the northeastern part of the country, working odd jobs and observing and learning about America. Occasionally, he slept in shelters, lodging houses, and even a police station, all of which provided him with his first exposure to some of the conditions faced by the homeless, details of which eventually showed up in *How the Other Half Lives*.

In the fall of 1873 Riis made a momentous decision about his future direction. Evidently his command of English had become fairly good because he landed the position of city editor of a weekly magazine, *The Review*, published in Long Island. Although he lasted only two weeks in the job and never got paid for it, he transformed himself into a journalist, entering the field that would give him the platform from which to make a living, express himself, and ultimately influence public opinion and policy.

Over the course of the next several years he wrote for a variety of publications, including the *South Brooklyn News*, which he purchased within a few months of becoming one of its reporters. He stuck with the Brooklyn publication as publisher and writer and made enough money within a year

to go back to Denmark, get married, and bring his bride back with him to Brooklyn, where he continued to work for the *News* as its editor.

In 1877, a year of great industrial strife in America, Riis expanded his horizons into areas that would eventually be reflected in *How the Other Half Lives*. He left the Brooklyn paper to give the advertising business a try. In that endeavor he began to make use of a fairly new piece of technology, the stereopticon, a projector with two lenses, known also as a *magic lantern*. Riis's fascination with the stereopticon as a way to market a product and his growing sense of the power of visual images to influence the public grew. Over the course of the 1880s he learned how to use flashlight powder, taught himself photography, and returned to journalism.

After a few months Riis jettisoned his career in advertising and went on the payroll of the *New York Tribune,* working the streets as a police reporter and covering life in the city as it revealed itself to him. For his first assignment, Riis ensconced himself in an office on Mulberry Street, directly across the street from police headquarters. Riis, who worked nights, sat in the thick of city life, covering not just the activities of the police but also the doings of the coroner's office, the fire department, and the health department. The experience provided the source of the dramatic stuff that would make *How the Other Half Lives* a vibrant and gritty text.

By the early 1880s Riis shifted to day work, which introduced him to another swathe of New York life: the deliberative bodies of state and municipal governments, the reform-oriented associations, and the social problems conferences that explored the many concerns that had accompanied the growth of the city via continued immigration. He met reformers bent on fixing the ills of the city. He attended lectures and sat in on meetings of commissions that took testimony from experts on matters of housing and health. In 1884 he covered the proceedings of the Tenement House Commission for the *Tribune*, following up on his 1881 report of the work of Dr. Roger Tracy, a sanitary inspector and statistician employed by the health department.

In the meantime Riis continued to experiment with and solidify his skills as a photographer. By 1888 he felt confident enough in this work that he began delivering an illustrated lecture, "The Other Half: How It Lives and Dies in New York," to a number of audiences, starting on January 25 with a presentation to the New York Society of Amateur Photographers. That year saw him take a number of other steps that would culminate in the 1890 publication of *How the Other Half Lives.* In March, he copyrighted the title "The Other Half: How It Lives and Dies in New York. With One Hundred Illustrations, Photographs from Real Life, of the Haunts of Poverty and Vice in the Great City." He also published "The Tenement House Question," an essay in two installments, in the *Christian Union,* thereby linking his name with the subject.

In December 1889 *Scribner's Magazine* published "How the Other Half Lives," chunks of which would appear in book form on November 15, 1890. The launch of Riis's most important work, and probably the most electrifying book of the progressive era, caused New Yorkers and many other Americans to sit up and take note.

Riis's fascination with the lower half and its social ills extended beyond the text of *How the Other Half Lives.* He published a string of books, all

bearing a striking similarity to his first and most significant one. They included *The Children of the Poor* (1892), *Out of Mulberry Street* (1898), and *A Ten Years' War* (1900), the tenth anniversary of the publication of *How the Other Half Lives.* By this point Riis had become an important figure in both the city's and the nation's life. In 1895 he had struck up a friendship with Theodore Roosevelt, then a member of New York City's Board of Police Commissioners. Riis met Roosevelt when he guided him on tour of some of the city's worst immigrant slums and then went on to help him campaign for the governorship in 1898 and for the presidency in 1904.

All of Riis's books concentrated on the linked themes of the slums, the pathologies of the poor, and the evils of congestion. In *The Battle with the Slum* (1902) he recounted his efforts and those of others to expose the horrors of slum life to the public and, more important, to get government to act in response to that information. The next year saw the release of *Children of the Tenements* and *The Peril and Preservation of the Home.* Riis became in essence the spokesman for New York's tenement dwellers in as much as others recognized him as the expert, as the individual most able to explain how the poor lived and to expose their way of life. In 1904, for example, he led Booker T. Washington and the archbishop of Canterbury on tours of the immigrant east side.

Two years after his wife, Elisabeth, died in 1905, Riis married his secretary, Mary Phillips. Riis, then suffering from heart disease, and Mary moved to a farm in Barre, Massachusetts, where he died, on May 26, 1914.

His contemporaries recognized Riis as the authority on the plight of the urban poor. A century later, however, scholars and social critics in a very different era launched a critique of Riis, stripping away the conceit that any one person could speak for millions of immigrants, whose languages he did not know, whose cultures he could only guess at, and whose values he did not share. Modern critics noted the basically conservative underpinning of *How the Other Half Lives,* its fear of the crowd and its abhorrence of disorder, and depicted Riis as a voyeur who went out of his way to show the most decadent, the most macabre, the most prurient examples of urban life. They pointed out the prejudices that lay at the heart of the book and the highly subjective assumptions that blinded Riis from seeing the dense networks of social life that gave meaning to the poor and that provided them with much of what Riis assumed they lacked: family life, neighborliness, morality, bonds of support, and even the ability to assert control over their daily lives. Riis had no place in his vision, later critics noted, for the class-based actions of the urban masses to change their work lives through collective action, such as labor organizing.

Yet at the time of the book's publication and for many decades thereafter, Riis stood as a symbol of a particular aspect of American life, a liberal progressive strand of social conscience and consciousness. Historians and spokespeople for liberal causes have represented Riis, in both the popular and scholarly press, as an American success story, the immigrant who made it but who, in the process of achieving his own personal triumph, recognized that most would not. He stands out in the American liberal tradition as someone who witnessed horrible conditions, perceived the profound and very real social problems of others, spoke out about those problems, and chided the public to share in solving the escalating crisis. He took upon himself a cause of grave significance and prodded others, comfortable women

and men like himself, to learn and to act. Riis came to stand for enlightened civic activism, as someone who believed, and wanted others to believe as well, that the two "halves" of society had an inextricable responsibility toward each other.

HASIA R. DINER

A Note on the Text

How the Other Half Lives was first published by Charles Scribner's Sons in 1890. This Norton Critical Edition is based on the 1901/02 Scribner's edition of the work.

The reproductions in this edition are from photographs in the Jacob A. Riis Collection at the Museum of the City of New York, which comprises the original complete compilation of Riis's pioneering works of photojournalism, including 415 original negatives, 326 glass lantern slides, and 191 vintage prints made by Riis in the 1880s and 1890s. After Riis's death in 1914, his collection remained undiscovered in the attic of the family's Long Island home until 1946. It was then that the photographer's son, Roger William Riis, donated Riis's photographic works to the Museum of the City of New York. Jacob A. Riis never considered himself a photographer and only took pictures he could not otherwise acquire. Today, his photographs are universally valued by social and photographic historians.

Contents

Illustrations

All images are from the Museum of the City of New York, Jacob A. Riis Collection