

Tom Buk-Swienty, *Den ideelle amerikaner – EN BIOGRAFI OM JOURNALISTEN, REFORMISTEN OG FOTOGRAFEN JACOB A. RIIS*. Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 2005; 501 pages; ISBN: 87-02-00911-0. Hardback; app. \$ 48.

American Studies basically came into being as an effort to establish alternatives to the ascription of major historical and cultural significance to a selected range of lives. In relation to this, the endemic character of biographies within American Studies may seem an anomaly in the sense that they normally depict lives that, in a rather conventional way, are perceived to be successful and therefore part of the public sphere. Very few people write, or wish to read, detailed accounts of conventional and/or more hidden lives, and stories of unknown failures are even more difficult to sell. The popular narratives are rather those depicting people who might have become unknown failures but who did not, and who – through that process – managed to challenge, and perhaps change, established societal structures. Tom Buk-Swienty's newly-published biography of Jacob Riis (1849-1914) – which is to be published in English by Norton as *The Ideal American. Jacob A. Riis: A Biography* – is precisely such a story, which, in addition, is an archetypical American immigrant story in that it charts the processes through which a Dane from rather modest circumstances traverses social boundaries and becomes not only an established American but, according to President Theodore Roosevelt, an "ideal American" (the title of the book). That the main contours of such a narrative indeed are familiar should not, however, keep potential readers away. As with any good biography, the significant stories are also in the contexts and details, of which there are many in this thoroughly researched, well-crafted and voluminous book based on large amounts of archival material from both Denmark and the United States (e.g. Riis' diaries and letters).

Jacob Riis was born in Ribe in 1849, a small town in South-West Denmark. His parents, who both came from Elsinore (Helsingør) on Zealand (app. 50 kilometres north of Copenhagen), had – three years before Jacob was born – moved to this flat, sandy and more sparsely populated part of Denmark because his father, Niels Edvard Riis, had taken a job as headmaster in Ribe. The figure of the stern and bookish father, whose respect Jacob Riis sought and belatedly got, is one of the main forces motivating (this narrative of) the young Riis' life. However, what Riis even more ardently sought, and belatedly got, was the love of Elizabeth Giørtz. Common to the processes leading to the respect of his father and the love of Elizabeth were issues of social class. His father, who himself had moved into the world of teaching from a more modest background, installed in Riis a wish or rather an assumption that he would progress somehow beyond what could be expected from his circumstances. Riis thus did not see, or accept, the social distances separating him from his first real love Elizabeth, who was the foster-daughter of Balthasar Giørtz, one of the most successful in Ribe's new class of industrialists. It was, together with a more general European inclination towards America in the second half of the 19th century, ultimately Elizabeth's rejection of his marriage offer that sent Riis across the Atlantic in 1870, twenty-one years of age. Not having prepared this trip in any detail, it is indeed noteworthy how little Riis knew about America before going. The fact that upon arrival he spent a great deal of his savings on a gun is a good sign of that.

Riis was, however – at least initially – not very interested in America but rather bent on getting himself into a situation from which he once again could try to win the heart of Elizabeth. Part of this was an attempt to return to Europe as a voluntary soldier on the French side in the war that broke out between France and Germany in July 1870. His (somewhat) far-fetched hope was that he could return to Ribe as a war hero who had avenged Denmark's loss to Germany some years earlier, and thus win the heart of Elizabeth. Riis did not get to France, and for the following years he had his hands full simply trying to survive. Many of the jobs that he had, and there were many, paid so little that he could only (and barely) get by. And when out of a job, which was often, the situation worsened and for long periods he lived like a vagabond, a fact he never consciously or publicly acknowledged (it is clear, however, that these experiences were seminal for his later activities). Although Jacob traveled throughout the North East, he continued, for various reasons, to gravitate back to New York, where he – more than once – was homeless and destitute and once on the brink of suicide. When Riis once again came to New York in 1873 it was after learning that Elizabeth was to marry a Danish officer (and war hero!). This news, which obviously devastated Riis, also somehow made him more committed to becoming an American, and it was as part of that process that he planned to learn the trade of telegraphing, a trade that could secure him a stable income. It was in order to learn how to operate telegraph equipment that he came to New York and signed up at the Thompson's Business College on Manhattan. In order to finance going to school, Riis peddled irons from door to door. But when America entered into a severe recession at around 1874, Riis once again found himself without an income, homeless and hungry. Through a stroke of luck, however, he had a chance meeting with the founder of the college he was attending, Mr. Thompson, who gave him a reference for a job as a reporter for The New York News Association.

It was this job, as well as his experiences at the bottom of the social ladder, that put Jacob on the track that later would make him a well-known journalist, photographer, author, lecturer, and reformist determined to change the conditions of those living in the most deprived areas of New York. Before he reached the pinnacle of his career, however, he was first to own and sell a newspaper, the *South Brooklyn News*, and, not least, go to Denmark to pick up his future wife, the love of his life, Elizabeth Giørtz. Reluctant at first, because of Riis' open and tactless proposition upon hearing of her first husband's death from disease, Elizabeth finally decided to give in to her determined and committed lover from America. After their wedding in Ribe, the couple went back to New York, where Riis, in 1878, got a job as police reporter for the *New York Tribune*, at the time one of the most prestigious newspapers in New York. It was in this job that his writing skills and social conscience became woven together, as he started to report from the tenements he saw on his nightly rounds with the police. It was this work that eventually led to his best-known book, *How the other Half Lives* (1890). And it was also in this job that he met and became close friends with Theodore Roosevelt (1858-1919), who in 1895 became prefect of the police in New York, and thus got an office in the building where Riis shared a room with other police reporters. Roosevelt had read *How the other Half Lives* and the two men,

despite their very different upbringings, were very much in agreement and a friendship was sealed that would last until Riis' death in 1914.

It was Roosevelt who called Riis New York's "most valuable citizen" and "the ideal American." In relation to this, it is, however, important to point out that Riis, as well as many other progressives, had no links to socialism (which some may be inclined to think given Riis' experiences and activities). Riis' contribution (a contribution still very much needed, it is worth pointing out) was to present the poor as being no different than those who had made it. His larger aim was thus to battle the perception of poverty as moral failure. His crusade was therefore not aimed at charity but rather at legislation preventing the exploitation of the poor, which is why much of his energy was directed towards getting rid of the worst slum tenements. As far as the poor themselves were concerned, the main road out of poverty was, according to Riis, still hard work. The moral foundation of Riis' commitment to give everybody, especially children, a fair chance derived partly from his upbringing in the small town of Ribe, in whose image he somehow tried to convert New York, and partly from a religious outlook through which people were seen as morally accountable individuals rather than as units prescribed into classes. Given this foundation, as well as Riis' own fervent struggles to succeed both personally and professionally, it is no wonder that Roosevelt called him an "ideal American." Ideal or not, Riis was indeed influential in the transformation of the way Americans perceived their country as it moved through a period of intense industrialization and eked its way towards modernity.

Riis' life was, like any other life, an intricate intersection of personal circumstances, traits and goals, and larger cultural, political, and economic developments and these "levels" (if we can talk of such) are – as the condensed retelling above hopefully indicates – admirably woven together in Buk-Swienty's biography of Riis. One may object, however, that a biography that explicitly sets out to trace the processes through which Riis became successful and influential may end up constructing a level of coherence – the book largely reads like a (19th-century) novel (with lots of photographs) – that is absent in lived life. On the other hand, it could also be argued that such narrative integrity is inherently related to the shape and commitments of the lived life, and that narratives and lived life thus at bottom are inseparable. In any case, students of American culture should be thankful that Riis managed to live, and Buk-Swienty was able to tell, this particular life-story.

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Lucille P. Fultz, *Toni Morrison: Playing with Difference*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003. 141 pages; ISBN: 0252028236 hardcover; \$34.95.

Although Toni Morrison scholarship has by now become something of an industry, there is always room for another innovative study that provides a fresh perspective on what we believe we already know. Lucille P. Fultz's 2003 book, *Toni Morrison*: