How the Other Half Lives

How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York (1890) was an early publication of photojournalism by Jacob Riis, documenting squalid living conditions in New York City slums during the 1880s. It served as a basis for future "muckraking" journalism by exposing the slums to New York City's upper and middle classes.

History and contents

During the 1880's many people in upper- and middle-class society were unaware of the dangerous conditions in the slums among poor immigrants. Jacob Riis, an immigrant himself who could not originally find much work, hoped to expose the squalor of the 19th century Lower East Side of Manhattan. After a successful career as a police reporter he decided to publish a photojournal documenting these conditions using graphic descriptions, sketches, photographs, and statistics. Riis blamed the apathy of the monied class for the condition of the New York slums, and assumed that as people were made more aware of these conditions they would be more apt to help eradicate them.

During 1889 Riis wrote a magazine article exposing some of the bad conditions of New York slums which was published with a number of engravings of his photographs. The article proved to be popular and Riis spent the better part of a year expanding it into the book How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York.[1] The book was also successful. Soon after its publication, the New York Times lauded its content, claiming it to be a "powerful book".[2]

The title of the book is a reference to a sentence by French writer and philosopher François Rabelais, who famously wrote in his Pantagruel: "one half of the world does not know how the other half lives" ("la moitié du monde ne sait pas comment l'autre vit").

Riis was a police reporter who had himself known poverty[3]. In How the Other Half Lives he describes the system of tenement housing that had failed, as he claims, due to greed and neglect from wealthier people. He claims a correlation between the high crime rate, drunkenness and reckless behaviour of the poor and their lack of a proper home.[4] Chapter by chapter he uses his words and photographs to expose the conditions inhabited by the poor in a manner that "spoke directly to people's hearts".[5]

He ends How the Other Half Lives with a plan of how to fix the problem. He explains how the plan is do-able and how the upper classes will not only profit financially from such ventures, but have a moral obligation to tend to them as well.[6]

Due to the recent invention of flash photography, Riis was able to photograph the unlit areas of tenements and expose wretched working and living conditions. The harsh white light from magnesium flash powder often caused a look of shock on the faces of those photographed and was accepted as an indication of candid and objective photography. Riis gained credibility from this effect and from the spontaneous appearance of the newly introduced snapshot.

How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York explained not only the living conditions in New York slums, but also the sweatshops in some tenements which paid workers only a few cents a day. The book explains the plight of working children; they would work in factories and at other jobs. Some children became garment workers and newsies (newsboys).
How The Other Half Lives and other works of Riis were greatly influenced by the reporting of Charles Dickens, whom Riis greatly admired for his stories of London’s poor. Much of Riis’s writing style is similar to Dickens’, who used first-person encounters to expose the “other half.”

References


Literature


External links

• How the Other Half Lives complete text and photos online (http://www.authentichistory.com/1898-1913/2-progressivism/2-riis/index.html)
• Audio version of How the Other Half Lives (http://librivox.org/how-the-other-half-lives-by-jacob-riis/) from LibriVox
• How the Other Half Lives Portfolio at NYU (http://journalism.nyu.edu/portfolio/books/book287.html)
• Documenting the “Other Half” (http://xroads.virginia.edu/~MA01/Davis/photography/riis/riis.html)
• What Do The World and People Deserve (http://www.lenbernstein.com/RiisArticle.html)
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