2020

Jacob A. Riis: The Ideal American Citizen

Flemming Just

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/thebridge

Recommended Citation

Just, Flemming (2020) "Jacob A. Riis: The Ideal American Citizen," The Bridge: Vol. 43: No. 2, Article 9. Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/thebridge/vol43/iss2/9

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Bridge by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
At his death in 1914, Jacob A. Riis was one of the US’s best-known and most admired citizens, who had been able to effect more social change than most of his peers. President Theodore Roosevelt had earlier declared Riis to be “the most useful citizen of New York,” and now called him “the ideal American citizen.”¹ In one of many obituaries of Riis we read:

Denmark gave him to us, and if we gave Denmark millions in return, we could not pay her for what Riis did for us and for what Riis inspired us to do. He landed in New York with only $40 in his pockets, but his service for humanity has left that city an endowment of blessing, practical and spiritual, that all the wealth of Mr. Carnegie and Mr. Rockefeller could not excel.²

Riis’ efforts were shown in progress through his book *How the Other Half Lives* from 1890, which helped to herald the Progressive Era, the period of reform that followed two decades of rampant, uncontrolled capitalism. Historian Hasia R. Diner describes the book as one of only a handful that led to a fundamental transformation of public opinion and change of policy in the area in question.³

The contributions of Jacob A. Riis have been largely forgotten by the general public, though his works are still part of the eighth-grade curriculum in New York state. Yet over the past fifteen years there has been a growing interest in Riis, with several big exhibitions in the US and Denmark, while a touring exhibition about him is currently on its way around twenty-six American states. His name nowadays is mainly linked to the stark photographs he took of the New York slums from 1887 through the following decade. On the international level, and especially in the US, he is still regarded as a pioneer of documentary photography, and he is at last receiving long-overdue
appreciation in Denmark, thanks to books, articles, and now a whole museum devoted to his life and influence. June 2019 saw the opening and subsequent success of the Jacob A. Riis Museum in his hometown of Ribe, a part of the Museum of Southwest Jutland.

Bandits' Roost, at Mulberry Street 59½, is considered one of Jacob A. Riis' most iconic pictures and has been reproduced countless times in books and articles. The photo was taken in October-November 1887 together with three amateur photographers, using a magnesium flash. *Photo courtesy of the Museum of the City of New York.*

This article focuses on Jacob A. Riis' role as a Danish American and the question of transnationalism. Is it possible to be loyal to *two* countries? One of Riis' closest friends, Theodore Roosevelt, who later became president, took a decisive stance on the matter. In his 1894
article, “What ‘Americanism’ Means,” Roosevelt explicitly states that you can only love one flag—a standpoint he held throughout his life. Yet while Riis and Roosevelt seemed to have agreed on almost everything else and cherished their admiration for each other’s achievements, we shall see that they differed in their view of loyalty “to the flag.” But first, let us look more closely at the enormous transformation that American society underwent around the turn of the last century, as a result of immigration, industrialization, and urbanization.

Riis’ Humble Background

On Pentecost Sunday, June 5, 1870, the steamship Iowa arrived in New York. After a day in quarantine, it docked at Castle Garden in southwest Manhattan, where 540 hopeful immigrants disembarked. Among them was the twenty-one-year-old Jacob A. Riis, a poor carpenter’s apprentice who had left behind the medieval small town of Ribe. His overpowering but unrequited love for Elisabeth Gjørtz, three years his junior and daughter of the town’s richest man, motivated him to seek a better, more prosperous life in the US. If it had only been a question of work, he could have found a job in Esbjerg, thirty kilometers north of Ribe, where a port was being constructed for Danish exports—or he could have returned to the thriving building industry in Copenhagen, where he had trained as a carpenter. But he needed to get even farther away. Since Elisabeth had rejected his proposal of marriage, he had to prove that he was worthy of her before he could return to try again. For Riis, the US was the land of opportunity in every sense.

However, he first had to go through the wringer! After a promising start with several temporary jobs in the northeastern states, Riis returned to New York. Unable to find work, he soon sank into disillusionment, despair, and the pangs of hunger. Worst of all came the news from home that Elisabeth was to marry a Danish hero from the 1864 war with Prussia. Only chance occurrences prevented Riis from taking his own life, but after he managed to land a job in the newspaper business, he never looked back. One adventure followed another, each of which Riis faced with equal parts indomitable courage, enormous work-energy, a will to create a better life for others—and good fortune.
Three decades after his arrival on American shores, Riis had become one of America's most famous and respected men, and a close friend of President Theodore Roosevelt. Above all, and against the odds, he had married Elisabeth and brought her to New York. In 1901 they celebrated their silver wedding anniversary with the nation looking on, as they continued to enjoy life in middle-class Richmond Hill in Queens.

Massive Immigration and Housing Woes

Until 1880 the US received a steady flow of Irish, German, Scandinavian, British, and other immigrants, primarily Protestants, from northern Europe. Yet while this influx continued, it was soon dwarfed by two other waves of immigration. The first, lasting from approximately 1880 to 1914, was made up of no fewer than four million Italians, the vast majority from southern Italy, with almost a million from Sicily alone. They were uneducated, often illiterate, and escaping from famine. They bunched together in Italian neighborhoods, where they had no need to learn English; indeed, many of them dreamed of returning to Bella Italia. Both Chicago and New York acquired a "Little Italy," the latter being on the Lower East Side and soon also in Harlem. To a high degree it was these poverty-stricken Italians whom Riis met and portrayed in so many photographs.

The second major immigrant wave consisted of eastern European Jews, who were being increasingly persecuted in wide-ranging pogroms. In this explosive emigration 2.1 million Jews, a third of all those living in eastern Europe, relocated in the period 1881-1914. The vast majority came to the US, three-quarters of whom began their new life in New York. Many of these Jewish immigrants dreamed of owning their own small businesses, and a good number of them were employed in the textile industry. Like the Italians, they tended to cluster together in the same urban quarter, in New York on the Lower East Side. Here they gradually created a strong Yiddish culture, with their own newspapers, theatres, and powerful social fabric. The massive immigration into the Lower East Side meant that by the end of the nineteenth century, the area constituted the most densely populated space in the world.
The vast majority of these recent immigrants lived in tenement blocks, which for the most part offered only miserable, cramped living conditions. Congress had passed the first Tenement Law already in 1867, but, like most of the social legislation of subsequent decades, it was totally inadequate to the task. The steadily increasing housing problems inspired many proposals for reform. A few philanthropists even built model tenements in an attempt to show that five percent interest on any rent could create a satisfactory compromise between the owners’ wish for a profitable business and the tenants’ need for decent housing. The idea met with very little success, however, since owners in general could otherwise demand an interest rate two to three times higher. Moreover, most of New York’s rented housing was owned by small businessmen and, little by little, also by immigrants, who had no wish to forgo their newly won opportunity to make a profit.

The small and often wretched apartments were not only homes; they were often also workplaces, so-called sweatshops, where the
whole family and several more employees were involved. At the time New York was the world center of the clothing industry. From an early age, children had to work in a home industry or factory. Poverty was endemic, and crime was widespread, so many a homeless person had to struggle along on scraps. A tenth of the New York population was so poor that they were buried in Potter's Field, the cemetery for "the unknown and the poor" on Hart Island in the East River.

As a newspaper man, Riis wrote countless hard-hitting articles about child labor, wretched housing, hunger, poor water supply, and widespread corruption among politicians, civil servants, the police and so on. Beginning in the 1880s and 1890s other social reformers began to raise their voices, and among progressive politicians and public servants there was a realization that something had to be done. But it was the voice of Jacob Riis that proved to be the loudest, in large part because he was the first to link the power of his words to photographic evidence from his camera.

To gather this evidence Riis exploited the new possibility of taking photographs in dark conditions by using a flash. From 1887 he went into the dark apartments, the murky bars, the over-populated night quarters, and the various streets and workplaces on the Lower East Side. Whether the photos were taken by day or by night, they provided graphic proof of the raw nature of life lived in and around the densely packed tenement blocks. Riis then put together a slide lecture using a laterna magica and wrote a series of articles that were published in the New York Tribune, for whom he was a crime reporter. In 1890 he expanded and collected these articles in How the Other Half Lives: Studies among the Tenements of New York. The book was a great publishing success and opened the eyes of the white middle class to how "the other half" lived.

Although many other measures had been taken to combat urban housing issues before How the Other Half Lives appeared, the book heralded a symbolic transition into a new period in American history. Social development initiatives were still primarily driven by philanthropists, pastors, and other social reformers, but from around the turn of the century the approach changed character. It began to be driven to a much greater degree by "scientific philanthropy," that is, by people who documented the actual living conditions on a solid
statistical or scientific basis and then proposed solutions not just to the individual problems but to the general welfare as seen in an overview of urban development. The progressive movement laid the basis for regulations and a fledgling welfare state as it was already emerging in northern Europe in the same period.

Jacob A. Riis' breakthrough book, How the Other Half Lives, is still considered one of the most important books to bring about social change. Published in 1890 it heralded The Progressive Era, a period of reform that redressed the worst consequences of industrialization and urbanization. No previous book had contained so many photographs either, 17 in all. The book is still in print in various editions.
Progressives acknowledged that the market could not solve every problem and declared that a certain amount of regulation was necessary to mitigate the effects of the imperfect market. Riis was responsible for one of the era’s major reform victories when, in 1897, he orchestrated the demolition of the notorious slum blocks around Mulberry Bend on the Lower East Side; these were replaced by a large green area (now Columbus Park), where children could play. Riis’ social-conservative approach helped to clear much of the slum “cancer” that had prevented the creation of a safe and secure family life, especially for children.

Immigration, assimilation and national identity

The story of Jacob A. Riis and his fascinating life naturally focuses on social poverty, reform, and documentary photography, but Riis’ times and achievements also engage with other major questions, such as: should there be any limits on immigration? Should immigrants be allowed to retain their local culture instead of being expected to assimilate and become unhyphenated Americans? Can people feel a sense of loyalty to more than one country?

Until 1860 the US was primarily a land of farmers, artisans, and businessmen. Over the course of a few decades, intense industrialization, urbanization, and immigration created a quite different country. By this time there was no longer a frontier, since the whole country was now involved in the national economy. Nor was there a need for so many new farmers to cultivate the soil, especially when market prices were so low, so urban populations increased. The changing demographics of the new immigrants changed the ethnic and religious makeup of the country. While formerly the vast majority of immigrants had been white Protestants, they now included millions of Roman Catholics from southern Europe, Jews from eastern Europe, and many non-Christian Chinese and Japanese citizens, in addition to the freed slaves moving north from the southern states. Anxiety over these changes led to the rise of nativism, which focused on promoting the interests of native-born inhabitants (though not American Indians) against those of newer immigrants. From the 1890s through the 1920s, nativism and the immigrant question were part and parcel of practically every major social and economic issue in US politics.
In large cities, ongoing immigration not only presented an economic challenge in the face of rising unemployment; it also represented a much bigger threat, in the eyes of nativists, in that the "original" American culture (i.e., the culture of the Anglo-Saxon Germanic Christian immigrants that had preceded these massive new immigration waves) seemed to be at risk of being eroded as these allegedly ignorant, illiterate, and often unclean foreigners poured in and wreaked havoc on social order. Many of them neither could nor would not speak English, and the cities experienced growing social disorder with a rise in slum dwellings, sickness and poverty, crime, alcoholism, and prostitution. In some cities anti-Italian riots broke out. Strong anti-Chinese sentiment on the West Coast led Congress to pass the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, which forced railroad companies to import a large number of Mexican workers, who were not perceived as a racial threat at that time. Widespread anti-Catholic sentiment targeted the many Italian, Polish, and Irish immigrants. Likewise, anti-Semitism across class lines and geography led many people to believe that Jewish financiers were exploiting the wealth-producing classes.  

Some among the white Protestant majority population feared for the racial purity of the American people and questioned the country's ability to absorb and assimilate so many immigrants from Europe and Asia. Race and whiteness became markers of the different ethnic groups' degree of being "real" Americans. Native-born Americans of Anglo-Saxon "old stock" positioned themselves at the top, while new immigrants such as southern Italians and eastern European Jews were at the bottom. Scandinavian Americans—so-called because nativist writers rarely differentiated between Swedes, Danes and Norwegians—were generally considered to be almost on par with "old stock" Americans. Their Protestant background and educational level were, of course, assets. It definitely also counted that they were "found to be the fairest among the so-called white races."  

At the same time, many people shared the concern that the large number of illiterate immigrants would not follow American values or respect American law and justice. To use an expression borrowed from social Darwinism, they were depicted as "beaten men from beaten races, representing the worst failures in the struggle for existence." Even the New York Times complained about "the physical, moral, and
mental wrecks" arriving from Europe, and argued that most Americans believed they could do without immigrants from Russia and Italy. An 1892 article claimed that such people had "a great resistance to being assimilated and Americanized," and concluded that "an influx of such a quality and quantity is a national nuisance." In general the press carried articles of a more or less racist nature aimed, for example, at Russian Jews with their "rat’s eyes" and mafia-infected Italians with their penchant for personal vengeance.

In 1891 Congress passed an immigration law transferring control of the processing of immigrants from local to federal authorities. In New York, which was the port of entry for a large number of foreigners, immigration control was transferred from Battery Park on the southernmost tip of Manhattan (where Riis had disembarked in 1870) to the newly built facilities on Ellis Island. From 1892-1954 no fewer than twelve million European immigrants entered the US via Ellis Island. If immigrants passed the island’s health examination (only 2 percent failed in the above-mentioned period), they moved on to the immigration inspectors, who also assessed whether they might pose a burden to society or be too weak for the workforce. In 1909 President Theodore Roosevelt was replaced by another Republican, William Howard Taft, who tightened immigration controls. The new director of Ellis Island promised to keep out as many "undesirables" as possible. He was to ensure that "unintelligent" immigrants with "low vitality" were excluded, and he personally introduced a demand that immigrants should be in possession of at least twenty-five US dollars. Even so, the annual number of immigrants admitted ranged between eight and nine hundred thousand. They were helped by a wide variety of relief organizations with a background in the various nationalities, including a Danish aid society. The largest of these was the Jewish organization, which helped the many eastern European Jews, who were those who came to grief most often, not least because of their poor physical condition.

Many prosperous, established Americans regarded the enormous influx of southern and eastern Europeans as a danger to American life as they knew it. This belief resulted in the founding of anti-immigrant lobbyist groups such as the Immigration Restriction League in 1893, which contributed to the passage of the Immigration Act of
1917; this legislation denied entrance to the country to people who could not read. The same applied to proven anarchists, the mentally ill, homosexuals, contract workers (excluding Mexicans), and others too numerous to mention. The act also prevented most Asians from entering the US. In 1921 the Emergency Quota Act fixed the number of immigrants every year and assigned quotas on the basis of nationality according to their representation in the 1910 census, a system that affected southern and eastern Europeans in particular. The National Origins Act of 1924 tightened these restrictions further and made them permanent (they remained in effect until being repealed in 1965).
Riis’ life and attitudes are a useful lens through which to examine the question of national identity. When Roosevelt in 1914 called him “the ideal American citizen,” he meant that Riis – despite being an immigrant – was a good American citizen who was completely integrated and who gave all for his new fatherland. What did Riis think of these nativist currents? He clearly supported giving the persecuted and able-bodied the opportunity to enter the country he loved so much. He believed that there was room for them and that they were a potential asset, if they were willing to work hard. At the same time, Riis was a powerful champion of swift integration, which meant, in his view, that immigrants should learn English and adopt American values as quickly as possible. For this reason, he had a problem with the Chinese, who kept to themselves and seemed to simply refuse to integrate. He also found it difficult to understand why Italians and Jews crowded together in their own “little nations” and “little quarters” in various parts of the city.

Patriotism and Americanism

From the mid-1890s onwards, Riis and Roosevelt were close friends and allies in the reform movement. Their mutual admiration led Riis to write a major biography of Roosevelt which could find no fault in its subject. They appeared to agree on everything, and indeed thought alike on many issues. Both were strong patriots, regarding American influence and interventions in Central America and the Pacific as a natural safeguarding of US interests. Both believed in the intrinsic value of hard work and its rewards. This involved a much greater degree of liberty than was available in Europe and offered better opportunities to climb the social ladder. However, on the question of social identity there were clear differences in their attitudes. In a nutshell, they differed on the symbolic question of whether immigrants should love only one flag or whether they could just as well love two.

Patriotism means love of fatherland, defined as the land with which one most identifies with or is loyal towards. It comes from a feeling of national identity and a sense of unity with certain specific values. Nationalism, on the other hand, is more of a political ideology, in which the ideal is a merging of language, culture, and the formation
of a state. It often includes the demand to reclaim areas which at some point in history belonged under the state. For many, nationalism is inherently hostile towards foreigners, and is synonymous with national chauvinism; in contrast, others regard it as a bulwark against a lack of culture and history and the watering-down of national interests. The immigration waves from 1880-1914 made the question of what America was, and what it meant to be an American, increasingly urgent. One of those who contributed most to the debate was Theodore Roosevelt. In 1894 the thirty-six-year-old up-and-coming politician wrote an article about what it meant to be a “true American.” He demanded full assimilation and was a strong opponent of “hyphenated Americans” (such as German Americans, Irish Americans, etc.), declaring, “we want only Americans.” He continued:

Americanism is a question of spirit, conviction, and purpose, not of creed or birthplace... A Scandinavian, a German, or an Irishman who has really become an American has the right to stand on exactly the same footing as any native-born citizen in the land and is just as much entitled to the friendship and support, social and political, of his neighbors. 23

Roosevelt was open to immigration but believed that immigrants needed to learn the English language as quickly as possible and work hard to contribute to the development of their new land. They should forget all about the land they had left behind and instead transform themselves into one common people, the American people. He cautioned:

Where immigrants, or the sons of immigrants, do not heartily and in good faith throw in their lot with us, but cling to the speech, the customs, the ways of life, and the habits of thought of the Old World which they have left, they thereby harm both themselves and us. If they remain alien elements, unassimilated, and with interests separate from ours, they are mere obstructions to the current of our national life, and, moreover, can get no good from it themselves.... So, from his own standpoint, it is beyond all ques-
tion the wise thing for the immigrant to become thoroughly Americanized. Moreover, from our standpoint, we have a right to demand it. We freely extend the hand of welcome and of good-fellowship to every man, no matter what his creed or birthplace, who comes here honestly intent on becoming a good United States citizen like the rest of us. 24

The Making of an American

November 1901 saw the publication of Jacob A. Riis’ autobiography, *The Making of An American*. Of the sixteen books he published, it proved to be his next best seller after *How the Other Half Lives*. By the standards of the day, it was handsomely produced, with 16 chapters, 443 pages, and 84 illustrations, all contributing to Riis’ reputation and fame. The book ends with a chapter entitled “The American Made,” which reads as a pledge of faith to the American flag and society, while also emphasizing Riis’ enduring connection to Denmark. It is thus testimony to the dilemma that so many immigrants experience, as their identity travels with them to the new land. Riis argues that national identity is not necessarily a permanently fixed point but can develop and contain a twofold loyalty. His readers could also take Riis as an example of all the hardships poor immigrants must face before they met with success. The indirect message of the book is therefore that for the energetic and enterprising immigrant the US was indeed “the land of opportunity.”

By its very title, *The Making of an American* signified that the author wished to tell his audience that now he was an American. Moreover, his journey had been much like that of any other American immigrant. He was proud of being an American and was working tirelessly to show it, but he had not thrown the old world overboard. When King Christian IX had asked how the Danes were doing in America, Riis answered, “I told him they were good citizens, better for not forgetting their motherland.” 25 *The Making of an American* nevertheless closes with a paean to America and the American flag, in which Riis speaks in almost biblical terms about a final transformation. The background was his return to Denmark in 1899 to visit his mother and travel round Denmark. During the trip he became
There sailed past, close inshore, a ship flying at the top the flag of freedom, blown out on the breeze till every star in it shone bright and clear. That moment I knew. Gone were illness, discouragement, and gloom! Forgotten weakness and suffering, the cautions of doctor and nurse. I sat up in bed and shouted, laughed and cried by turn, waving my handkerchief to the flag out there. They thought I had lost my head, but I told them no, thank God! I had found it, and my heart too, at last. I knew then that it was my flag: that my children's home was mine, indeed: that I also had become an American in truth. And I thanked God, and, like unto the man sick of the palsy, arose from my bed and went home, healed.”

Riis is spreading the butter thick here. The very sight of the Stars and Stripes has a Christ-like healing effect on him and simultaneously confirms that he is now a full-blooded American.

From the corrections in his manuscript, we can see how meticulous Riis was with this final formulation. He clearly had his American reading public in mind, not least Vice President Theodore Roosevelt, to whom he sent the paragraph and its various revisions, knowing precisely what his friend wanted to read. In the above-mentioned article on Americanism and in numerous later speeches, Roosevelt in turn was absolutely single-minded: “The immigrant must revere only our flag; not only must it come first, but no other flag should even come second.” Riis’ employment of the American flag at the close of his autobiography is therefore a conscious answer to Roosevelt’s imperative.

However, he would not deny that he too was a hyphenated American, that he had a twofold national identity and a twofold loyalty. The whole book is one long testimony to this, for instance at the moment in 1870 when, inflamed with patriotism, he considered volunteering for the French army in order to fight the Germans, to whom the Danes
had lost a bloody war in 1864. Riis recalls, “I remembered the defeat, the humiliation of the flag I loved – aye! and love yet, for there is no flag like the flag of my fathers, save only that of my children and of my manhood.” He underlined this further with the central sentence: “Happy he who has a flag to love; twice blest be he who has two.”

Somewhat provocatively he includes in the final chapter of his autobiography a photograph of a group of children from the slums in Cherry Street on the Lower East Side. They are visiting his beautiful home in Richmond Hill, and behind all the children and adults in the back garden is a string, stretched between the house and a tree, on which the Danish flag, Dannebrog, is waving! Roosevelt was of course well aware that Riis was a hyphenated American. Most conspicuous of all to this effect was the royal Danish order of chivalry that Riis wore on a visit to President Roosevelt’s White House on the King of Denmark’s birthday, although Roosevelt had previously written that new Americans should stop marking the birthdays of monarchs and emperors and should instead celebrate George Washington and the Fourth of July rather than St. Patrick’s Day. Riis also wrote openheartedly: “I am afraid that thirty years in the land of my children’s birth have left me as much a Dane as ever.”

In this connection Riis used the analogy of asking what man would throw his old mother out to make room for his wife. He used the same analogy a couple of years later, when a reader wanted to know to which side he would owe his allegiance if the US and Denmark went to war with one another. He replied, “I should always fight for the flag to which I owed my allegiance,” but continued: “It would break my heart to see my mother and my wife fight.” Riis was not the only one to use that analogy. The German American general, Secretary of the Interior, editor, and reformer, Carl Schurz (1829-1906) was a strong proponent for seeing the old and new identities as an asset and as complementary to each other, explaining, “I love Germany as my mother. America is my bride.”

Roosevelt accepted Riis’ twofold loyalty, because he both needed Riis and greatly appreciated him, while at the same time recognizing that on so many points the “Danish American” was helping to develop American society. They were in total agreement on all political and ideological matters, and their views on race, religion, family, mascu-
linity, nature and so on were identical. It would doubtless have been otherwise if Riis had been a Russian, an Italian, or a Chinese with a twofold allegiance, since those ethnicities were considered to be at the lower end of the racial and ethnic hierarchy. Roosevelt did not hesitate to call Riis "the most useful citizen in the land." In his introduction to the 1914 edition of the autobiography, published shortly after Riis' death, Roosevelt writes, "If I were asked to name a fellow-man who came nearest to being the ideal American citizen, I should name Jacob Riis." It is worth noting, however, that Roosevelt did not call Riis "the ideal American," but "the ideal American citizen." The two men had a great and mutual admiration for each other, and Roosevelt could not do otherwise than accept Riis' transnationalism and twofold national loyalty, even though Riis never met Roosevelt's standard of "true Americanism" and full assimilation.

In addition to writing books, Riis also toured the US for several months of the year with his lantern slide lectures. Both his readers and his audiences may have got the impression that he shared the xenophobic view of immigrants by the dominant group whose origins were Anglo-Saxon or northern European. His was a strong voice for requiring full integration. In his first books he strongly disapproved of the clannishness of the Italians, the Irish, the eastern European Jews, and the Chinese. He had a strong tendency to present the various immigrant population groups as stereotypes: lazy Italians, dirty Polish Jews, drunken Irish, etc. However, Riis never supported any limitation on immigration, or subscribed to the tenets of nativism. Fundamentally, he welcomed all those who were in need and/or willing to contribute to the development of American society. As time passed, Riis also acquired a deeper insight into the homeland values that each of the population groups brought with them and realized that their retention might actually be an asset to the United States.

In the last ten or so years of his life, Riis became increasingly nostalgic, and spent more and more time telling his American audience about Danish and Nordic history. In 1909 he published The Old Town, which dealt with life in his hometown of Ribe. The following year came Hero Tales from the Far North with chapters on Nordic heroes such as Tordenskjold, Hans Egede, Gustav Vasa, Christian IV, and others. In addition, he wrote several magazine articles on topics from Danish
history. These were in no way historical studies, but rather served a propagandistic purpose. *Hero Tales from the Far North* tried to show the American public that immigrants carried a proud history with them and had much to contribute to their new land. However, Riis supported this argument with stories not from unknown Eastern Europe, the conflict-riven Balkans, or poor Southern Italy, but from heroic Scandinavia. Around the turn of the nineteenth century quite a few Scandinavian American writers pointed to the Viking settlement in the year 1000 on Newfoundland to stress the kinship between Scandinavians and the English people. Historian Jørn Brøndal explains, “According to this thought, the Norsemen, Anglo-Saxons, and Germans were all members of the proud Teutonic race; masculine morality was a barbarian virtue; vigor was a result.” As a concept, “Nordic” was at a premium—Scandinavians were known as solid, energetic, Protestant members of society. Hence, Riis could dare to make a point of bringing home the value of the old culture to his readers already in the book’s preface: “The immigrant America wants and needs is he who brings the best of his old home to the new, not he who threw it overboard on his voyage.”

His own life bears witness as to how fluid national identity is as a concept. The home he shared with Elisabeth and their children on Beech Street in Richmond Hill was furnished very much in Danish style, and they celebrated a “Danish” Christmas from start to finish. Little by little, however, their conversation switched from Danish to English, and their letters to Denmark followed suit. Already in 1884 Jacob A. Riis became an American citizen, equipped with an American passport. He was immensely proud of his new country and regarded Denmark as being in many ways a land lagging behind the US, bound as it was by convention. Nonetheless, it was the proudest moment of his life when, in 1900, King Christian IX made him a Knight of the Order of the Dannebrog. In an effusive speech of thanks Riis said, “No greater honor could befall me, nor any greater happiness, for thirty years’ citizenship of the Union has not managed to reduce my loyal affection for my old royal house.” It should be stressed that his admiration was for the king and the royal family, not for Denmark as a whole. He was proud of his small-town background, as we can read in his rosy *The Old Town*, where people lived a very traditional life,
took care of each other, and had a close relation to the open nature. The country as a whole, however, he found rather provincial and lacking American dynamism and possibilities for personal freedom and striving.

Neither was Riis' promotion of Danish and Nordic history connected to an affiliation with formal Danish American or Scandinavian American associations and personalities. His only involvement in a Danish organization came about when he was a young immigrant. He had been one of the founders of the still existing Danish church in Brooklyn, but when the family moved out to Richmond Hill he became a member of the Episcopal Church of the Resurrection. This was part of his social ascent, as the Episcopal Church generally attracted members of the Anglo-Saxon urban middle and upper classes. He was also not a strong supporter of the idea of an annual meeting of Danish Americans at Rebild Park in Denmark.

Both in his personal life and as a social reformer he had first of all an individualistic and family-oriented approach. He disliked the so-called scientific philanthropy with its broad sociological approach. He saw the suffering of children, women, men, and families, and he spent a lot of money on charity when he met worthy needy persons. Among them were young Danish immigrants if he found them to be hard workers who would contribute to American society. If he did not get that impression, he could be rather rude and tell them to travel back to Denmark immediately. He had successfully fought his own way up the social ladder and believed that others should do the same. As the perhaps most well-known Dane/Scandinavian of his era, fully integrated and highly acknowledged, he did not need a Danish network. His eyes were directed towards social improvements and influential Americans.

**Conclusion**

After the First World War, society demanded new answers to the great social challenges ahead, and Jacob A. Riis passed into history. Not until the early 1970s did an interest in Riis receive a boost with the publication of several biographies, not least Alexander Alland's *Jacob A. Riis. Photographer and Citizen* (1973). It is above all Alland we can thank for the preservation of over four hundred of Riis' photographs,
now kept in the Museum of the City of New York. The new interest in Riis in the 1970s, and again in the last fifteen years or so, is also due to his relevance for contemporary discussions about poor social housing, homelessness, slum buildings, and city planning.

In the twenty-first century Riis is truly being rediscovered, not least thanks to the new museum in Ribe. He is acknowledged as one of the pioneers of photojournalism, while his achievements as a social reformer continue to provide inspiration and critical analysis. A steady stream of books and articles, noted in the bibliography below, bear witness to his influence. Up close, we can also see his limitations - both of the times and in his character. Simultaneously we are fascinated by how this one man met failure and defeat with courage and enterprise. When the chance came, he seized it, and rode with it. His energy and will-power were directed towards a better society, and they demonstrably moved the world in a better direction.

Endnotes

1 Theodore Roosevelt, “Jacob Riis,” The Outlook, June 1914, 284.
2 Baltimore Sun, May 29, 1914.
3 Hasia R. Diner, ed. Jacob Riis: How the Other Half Lives: Authoritative Text. Contexts. Criticism (New York: Norton, 2009), vii. The first socially reformative book Diner mentions is Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin from 1852, which gave rise to the anti-slavery movement in the northern states. Another major work is Upton Sinclair’s The Jungle from 1906, which depicts the inhuman working conditions for immigrant workers in the slaughterhouse industry in Chicago. The other books are Rachel Carson’s The Silent Spring (1962), Betty Friedan’s The Feminine Mystique (1963), and Ralph Nader’s Unsafe at Any Speed (1965), which gave impetus to the environmental, women’s, and consumer movements, respectively. Like the other above-named books these accounts helped to change American law, politics, and practice.
5 Anbinder, 314.
8 Ibid., 34-39.
Jacob A. Riis: The Ideal American Citizen | Flemming Just


11 Tom Buk-Swienty’s The Other Half (Norton, 2008) is recommended as a well-written biography of Riis.

12 Lubove, 51.


16 Lubove, 51-55.


18 New York Times, March 6, 1892.


20 Anbinder, 342-49.

21 Diner, ix.


23 Theodore Roosevelt, “What ‘Americanism’ Means,” The Forum, April 1894, 202. The article is often mistakenly referred to as “True Americanism.” The Forum was established in 1886 and in the following decades became one of the country’s most powerful organs for major discussions on the direction of American society, not least as a mouthpiece for reformers.


26 Riis, Making of an American, 443.


29 Riis, Making of an American, 47.

30 Ibid., 396.

31 Ibid., 437.

32 Taubenfeld, 50.

33 Riis, Making of an American, 7.

34 Taubenfeld, 53.


36 Taubenfeld, 71.

79
37 The English translation of Tom Buk-Swienty’s Danish biography of Riis from 2005 is The Ideal American. The quotation is from Roosevelt, but, as noted earlier, if one were to follow Roosevelt’s idea of being a true American, the title should be “The ideal American citizen.”

38 Lewis F. Fried, Makers of the City (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1990), 25.


40 Jacob A. Riis, Hero Tales from the Far North (New York: Macmillan, 1910).

41 Royal Danish College of Arms (Ordenskapitlet). Letter of October 15, 1900.

42 Fried, 21.

43 Aarhus Amtstidende, July 14, 1908. The idea was realized in 1912 with the first Rebild Fourth of July festival, which attracted almost 10,000 participants.

44 Lane, “Jacob A. Riis and Scientific Philanthropy.”

45 Tom Buk-Swienty, Den ideelle amerikaner (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 2005), 256, 434.

Bibliography


Jacob A. Riis: The Ideal American Citizen | Flemming Just


