

How New York Became American, 1890–1924. By *Angela M. Blake*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006. xii + 242 pp. Index, notes, bibliography, illustrations. Cloth, \$49.95. ISBN: 0-801-88293-1.

Reviewed by Daniel Levinson Wilk

In 1903, popular essayist Hamilton Wright Mabie spoke at the ninety-ninth anniversary of the New-York Historical Society. For those past ninety-nine years, he said, most Americans from other places had looked on New York as almost a foreign land. This tradition claimed that “whatever New York is, it is not intellectual, religious, moral, homogeneous, beautiful, or American.” He went on to say, “New Yorkers have become so accustomed to this state of the provincial mind that they long ago ceased to deny, to explain, or to apologize” (p. 85). But, Mabie argued, the exact qualities that seemed so alien to “our friends, south and west,” New York’s diverse population and its exuberant commercial spirit, were exactly what made it the most American of cities.

Angela M. Blake’s new book, *How New York Became American, 1890–1924*, situates Mabie’s argument in New York City’s long public-relations campaign to win national and international recognition as “a verifiable, worthwhile, ‘American’ place” (p. 1). Blake argues that through the nineteenth century, New York had an identity problem. It was too diverse, complex, and unknowable to be understood as possessing a single identity, let alone an American one. Around the turn of the century, though, the city’s commercial and political leaders cooperated in redefining the city, reducing that complexity to a level that suited tourists and potential migrants. The two greatest “problems” in New York’s identity—commercial rapacity and immigrant-filled slums—were transformed by the iconography of skyscrapers and the marketing of tours through quaint ethnic neighborhoods. Blake traces this change through chapters on tenement reformers; the fin-de-siècle tourism industry; the symbolic roles of skyscraper architecture in the first two decades of the twentieth century; the increasing popularity of tours through immigrant communities after World War I; and the development of midtown in the 1920s. By this time, the boosters had succeeded, to a certain extent, in

making New York American. In the process, they may have remade what it meant to be American.

The first great strength of Blake's book is her ability to synthesize fields that are usually studied in isolation. She analyzes the efforts of Progressive-era reformers and social scientists, who saw themselves primarily as philanthropists, scholars, and policy-makers rather than as boosters, and she convincingly demonstrates their relation to the tourism industry. Architects, eugenicists, and machine politicians all find a place in the narrative. The point is that each of these diverse groups had a hand in developing the image of New York, and the fragmented efforts of the earlier period eventually gave way to a more coordinated, cohesive policy.

Second, Blake places a heavy emphasis on visual imagery: the propaganda photos and maps of the reformers, tourist maps and guidebooks, postcards, cartoons, architecture, views from the tops of buildings, and the pageantry of Greater New York's 1923 Silver Jubilee exhibition and parades. The details of this imagery mattered: guidebooks and travel literature, for example, used romantic pencil, charcoal, and ink-wash sketches of ethnic neighborhoods rather than the photographs by reformers Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine that revealed the depressing squalor of slum life all too vividly. Blake does an admirable job of relating these images to the reality they at once represented and helped to form (a common theoretical problem for scholars analyzing images or texts), most spectacularly when she explains how Americans metaphorically linked New York's skyline to the rocky landscape of the American West. One wishes that the publisher had allowed more than twenty reproductions.

Given this focus on imagery, there is an obvious gap: where are the movies? Blake makes two or three fleeting references, not according them even the few paragraphs that she allocates to radio broadcasts. Surely the medium of film, from early Edison street scenes to the famous panoramas of King Vidor's 1928 film *The Crowd*, played exactly the role that Blake assigns to images of New York skyscrapers. More significantly, *How New York Became American* does not deliver on the corollary implicit in the title: how the meaning of "American" became different. Did New York City's boosters change national as well as local identity? There are moments when Blake gives a nod to this issue, as when she discusses the "commodification of diversity" (p. 173) and

compares the built environment and urban populations as two occasionally conflicting markers of identity. But this book is content to chart the efforts of its protagonists, leaving aside the deeper implications of their success. As such, it is a welcome contribution to the growing literatures on tourism, boosterism, visual culture, and urban identity.

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