

2008

Downtown: My Manhattan

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Recommended Citation

Gunter, Rebecca Comer (2008) "Downtown: My Manhattan," *Vulcan Historical Review*: Vol. 12, Article 11.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.library.uab.edu/vulcan/vol12/iss2008/11>

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PETE HAMILL. *Downtown: My Manhattan.* New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2004.

Pete Hamill's invigorating work, *Downtown: My Manhattan*, revels in the historic city he calls the "capital of nostalgia." What could have easily turned into a nineteenth-century style urban walking tour round-and-about New York, took a divergent path. As Distinguished Writer-in-Residence at New York University and former Editor-in-Chief of the *New York Post* and the *New York Daily News*, as well as a contributor to *The New Yorker*, Hamill's nostalgic eleven chapters could have celebrated favorite haunts of the rich and famous. Instead, he perceives the long dureé of the nineteenth century as the yardstick measuring the expanding New Yorker and the widening diversity of immigrant communities. September 11, 2001, served as the impetus for Hamill's work as he celebrates the underlying mechanism of New York's toughness. Moreover, he believes, nostalgia nurtured the passionate immigrant energy that produced the modern city. Hamill revels in the lives of past generations of immigrants who lived, worked, and died in the city they created. An immigrant's nostalgia for the Old World, he writes, motivated them to succeed in America, and equally, connected them to family history back home.

Yet, an involuntary anger pervades Hamill's city-love. He argues that by not teaching the history of the city and the ways in which it built people's lives, public education and the passive culture of television failed both third- and fourth-generation European offspring. But here, Hamill fails to give poverty and racism their due, neglecting a discussion of working, single mother's struggles to keep her children off the streets during after-school hours. Matthew Gandy writes of the inequalities in the current city that spawned the "new" class of poor and homeless in *Concrete and Clay: Reworking Nature in New York City* (2002). Gandy discusses the "social cleansing" of central areas of cities that exhibited little tolerance toward social abnormalities. Gandy further cites controlled leisure, influenced by "public-private" partnerships in which social welfare revenues of cities have been channeled into corporate subsidies.

Hamill's personal Manhattan-consciousness resembles the miasmatic steam that rises from the sidewalks of New York. Only a native can decipher the historic levels of the mystical urban blend that daily

declare the extraordinary diversity of the city and the people that inhabit it. Hamill advocates the importance of the sense of place in history. He claims the elements that saturate the notion of home and place are connected in unpredictable subjective courses of action. Hamill's sense of place mixes of "memory, myth, lore and history" to merge the past and present. For this reason, he cheers on new immigrants who discover their city, by walking the streets among the landmarks and the ruins. Hamill suggests starting at the tenements on the old streets, and examining the Tenement Museum on the Lower East Side, which provides an educational source of cultural and city history. The bulk of history resides in Downtown Manhattan. For new immigrants, Downtown is the center of action and participation, as well, Hamill claims. Immigrants worked in multicultural food services, reconstructing old buildings, driving taxicabs, and simple entry-level jobs.

Hamill considers the Second World War as a great break in the "personal consciousness of time" for New York's immigrants. This break differed from that experienced by those in other states like California and Florida. Old New Yorker's divided time into three periods, with each accompanied by its own nostalgia: before, during, and after WWII. The details of post-war life experienced in other cities were different for New Yorkers in 1957. When the New York Giants and the Brooklyn Dodgers left town, Hamill observes, the conversations of New Yorkers gained a new preface that started with "Before the Dodgers left..."

100 | However, Manhattan's history has viable continuity for Hamill. He sees no break in its link to the present. He places the reader on the historical trail Native American trail that centuries later became the bright lights of Broadway. Its constant refusal to conform to the New York urban grid connects its past to the city's present. Broadway remains the only major avenue diagonally slicing across the grid, in urban non-conformity, out of the center toward the west. Hamill claims city planners knew better than to tamper with this historical ground. His Broadway is not characterized by the individual districts it passes through, but by great mixture and movement.

As a life-long New Yorker, working and living within the self-imposed "geographical limits" he calls Downtown, Hamill's New York history flows from his own perspective. It is the history of the "first

Downtown." Hamill's Manhattan is the that of his Irish immigrant parents, who arrived in New York from Belfast after the Great War. It is the history of his uncles arriving at Ellis Island from Ireland after fleeing the hostile atmosphere of the North. He celebrates the constant change and continuity of arriving new immigrants from Russia, Pakistan, India, China, Mexico, and Korea, settling into the old neighborhoods of the Irish, Jews, Italians, and Germans who came before them.

The grid of Hamill's neighborhood includes the Bowery, Lower East Side, Five Points, Birdland, Carnegie Deli, the former site of the World Trade Center, Battery Park, Ellis Island, U.S. Customs House, Tony Pastor's, and Harlem, along with other popular stops. His contemporary writing style transforms the ghosts of the city's past into a tangible form. Progressing in chronological order, Hamill visits the post-slavery location that became Harlem in the late 1920s. He shifts to the Five Points, where whites and blacks lived together during the nineteenth century—a social mix that eventually resulted in the Draft Riots. He reinvestigates John Diamond, the youthful Irish dancer at the Chatham and Bowery theaters, who teamed with Master Juba in 1844. Both influenced 1920s jazz and the development of tap dancing. Audiences for the Chatham were working-class Germans of the Fourth Ward waterfront, and the Five Points Irish from west of the Bowery. Hamill links a nineteenth-century historical thread to the veneration of the firemen of September 11, 2001. The myth of Engine Company 40's giant fireman Big Mose pervaded the stages of the Bowery, walked the streets of hero hungry youth, and, some claim, he was the template for comic book heroes. In 1866 dancing girls appeared on the stage, and the Bowery received criticism for the anti-Victorian attitudes that laced the show.

With a brief spate of textual balance, showing the other side of Downtown history, Hamill covers the waterfront, literally and historically. Moving from the two brothers from Switzerland who opened a wine and cheese shop that became the haunt of Fourteenth Street elites by 1861, he hastens to include Tammany Hall and the Democratic Convention in 1868. The author's nostalgia intensifies in recounting capitalism's "new money" and class push to edge out the established upper class. Only a native grows sentimental about the city blocks and buildings, or identifies

the ghosts that inhabit his personal chronology. Hamill calls this kind of personal history an "irrational love."

Nostalgia for the Old Country, Hamill asserts, started in earnest with the Gilded Age. With the rise of the middle class, the blending of the Knickerbocker bloodlines and the resulting compromise of manners, former Fourteenth Street inhabitants began to nurse a nostalgic ache for Old New York. Yet, Hamill's admittedly personal brand of history is not improper, because it comes from the voice of the immigrant experience. His Irish parents define immigrant "nostalgia" and longing for sense of place. Hamill expresses the euphoric nostalgia surrounding the city's colorful past, made more vivid by larger-than-life New Yorkers, whose accomplishments stand as landmarks on the historic landscape. Hamill cites historians Sean Wilentz, Charles Rosenberg, Gerard T. Koeppel, Sarah Bradford Landau, Carl Condit, Hasia R. Diner, and others, whose works on New York informed his own manuscript. The influence of such authors on his work lends impressive weight to Hamill's individual approach to Manhattan's history.

For Hamill, the hope of the future lies in the multicultural alloy of Irish, Jewish, Italians, and Africans that compose the demographic infrastructure of twenty-first-century Manhattan. He successfully locates nostalgia in the historical vernacular, attributing its definition to America's immigrant class struggles. Comparison with earlier immigrant letters and journals might have had an enriching effect on the work. Yet, in the end, Hamill aims to share "his Manhattan," believing that anyone from anywhere has a place in its history.

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