

## **Jacob A. Riis: Reporter and Reformer**

(by Joe Colletti, PhD)

An eighteen-page article with engravings of 19 photographs by Jacob Riis appeared in the 1889 Christmas edition of Scribner's Magazine. The photographs and the article exposed the shocking squalor and crime of tenement housing of the late 19th-century Lower East Side of Manhattan. A year later he expanded the article into his renowned book How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York, - published by Scribner's Books which, in turn, further exposed the wretched conditions in which hundreds of thousands of renters lived; thousands died, including hundreds of infant children who were left in front of churches and hospitals for burial.

This book and others written by Riis, The Children of the Poor (1892); Out of Mulberry Street: Stories of Tenement Life in New York City (1896); A Ten Years' War: An Account of the Battle with the Slum in New York (1900); and Children of the Tenements (1903) opened the eyes not only of the other half that lived in New York City, but the eyes of the nation. The eyes of soon-to-be U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt were opened as the result of the forays he took with Riis into the shameful neighborhoods where poor immigrants lived and worked while serving as New York Police Commissioner. As Governor, Roosevelt turned his eyes upon those who perpetuated such conditions and supported the fight to enact many reforms led by Riis.

As a result of Riis' leadership, health and sanitation laws were passed and enforced as philanthropic organizations and special commissions investigated the abuses revealed by his photographs. Housing codes were adopted that required fire escapes, windows, toilets and running water. Existing housing was upgraded or razed depending on current conditions. New housing had to meet modern improvement standards required by law. By the time he died in 1914, Riis was known as the "Emancipator of the Slums."

Riis threw himself into exposing the horrible living and working conditions of poor immigrants because of his own horrendous experiences as a poor immigrant, which he details in his autobiography entitled The Making of an American. For years he lived in one substandard house or tenement after another and took one temporary job after another. He was robbed, beaten, and homeless, and he was also sick constantly during this period of his life before he entered into the profession of journalism, the means by which he escaped such a miserable life.

During his life as a photographer, writer, and publisher, Riis was not afraid to express his faith or anger and at times, both at the same time, when his profession was paving his way to be a reformer. His autobiography is filled with expressions and experiences of his Christian faith. There is one notable incident that is filled with such expressions and experiences that Riis pinpointed as a turning-point in his life. The incident is meticulously described by Tony Carnes who is Editor and Publisher of "A Journey through NYC religions" as "A recovery of the story of Jacob Riis' faith" (see <http://www.nycreligion.info/postsecular-nyc-jacob-riis>).

### **A recovery of the story of Jacob Riis' faith**

In October 1872 Jacob Riis thought he had reached the nadir of his two year struggle as a new immigrant from Denmark. He was without a friend, cent in his pocket, or home. These were "nights of hopeless misery" and being "utterly alone in the city, with the winter approaching."

Riis wandered over to the Hudson River and wondered if his life could go on. Facing the river with loneliness and hopelessness, he asked himself, "What if...? Would they [family and friends back in Denmark] miss me much?" As he was working up to a decision to throw himself into the waters, a little black and tan dog, as cold and lonely as Riis himself, pressed up against the man for warmth. Riis felt as if the dog was God's hand holding him back from the brink. "And the love of the faithful little beast thawed the icicles in my heart."

Now determined to survive, Riis went back to the slum neighborhood to seek shelter at police headquarters. It was a rough place that he fell into. The homeless were stacked tight on cold hard wood floors without bedding and at night fell to thieving and fighting. When Riis complained that someone had stolen from him, the desk sergeant dragged Riis and threw him out on the steps. The poor dog who was waiting for Riis sprang to his new master's defense, taking a bite at the policeman's ankle. The sergeant picked up the small dog by his back legs and beat his brains out on the steps of police headquarters.

It was a horrible moment but one that Riis remembers as another act of God in helping him on his way to standing up for the poor. He wrote, "The outrage of that night became, in the providence of God, the means of putting an end to one of the foulest abuses that ever disgraced a Christian city [the treatment of the homeless], and a mainspring of the battle with the slum as far as my share in it is concerned. My dog did not die un-avenged."

### **Books about Jacob Riis**

- Rediscovering Jacob Riis: Exposure Journalism and Photography in Turn-of-the-Century New York by Bonnie Yochelson & Daniel Czitrom;
- Jacob Riis: Reporter and Reformer by Janet B. Pascal.

### **Books by Jacob Riis**

- [How the Other Half Lives: Studies among the Tenements of New York](#);
- [The Children of the Poor](#);
- [Out of Mulberry Street: Stories of Tenement Life in New York City](#);
- [A Ten Years' War: An Account of the Battle with the Slum in New York](#);
- [The Making of an American](#);
- [The Battle with the Slum](#).

### **Recommended Reading and Reflection:**

**Book:** Photography as Activism: Images for Social Change by Michelle Bogre

This book provides a historical overview of activist photography including the influence of Jacob Riis and several other well-known and lesser-known activists from across the world who used their photographs to bring about social change.

**Short Stories:**

The following link - <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/19014/19014-h/19014-h.htm> - provides two short stories about Christmas Eve and Christmas Day in the east side tenements of New York City entitled "Nisby's Christmas" and "What the Christmas Sun saw in the Tenements" written by Jacob Riis. These stories, and his photographs, were meant to be disturbing to readers.

**Recommended Music and Reflection:**

Click [here](#) to view some of Jacob Riis' still images about life in the tenements while listening to the accompanied music "Coming Home" by Phillip Yon, which can be downloaded from Garageband.com.

(Thelma – link for click here - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kchN8ZiFGyE>

**Recommended Video and Reflection:**

Click [here](#) to listen and view a video about the faith of Jacob A. Riis which is provided by A Journey through NYC religions (<http://www.nycreligion.info/author/admin/>).