



# Rediscovering Jacob Riis: Exposure Journalism and Photography in Turn-of-the-Century New York

*Bonnie Yochelson, Daniel Czitrom*

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Before publishing his pioneering book *How the Other Half Lives*—a photojournalistic investigation into the poverty of New York’s tenement houses, home to three quarters of the city’s population—Jacob Riis (1849-1914) spent his first years in the United States as an immigrant and itinerant laborer, barely surviving on his carpentry skills until he landed a job as a muckraking reporter. These early experiences provided Riis with an understanding of what it was like to be poor in the immigrant communities that populated New York’s slums, and it was this empathy that would shine through in his iconic photos.

With *Rediscovering Jacob Riis*, art historian Bonnie Yochelson and historian Daniel Czitrom place Jacob Riis’s images in historical context even as they expose a clear sightline to the present. In the first half of their book, Czitrom explores Riis’s reporting and activism within the gritty specifics of Gilded Age New York: its new immigrants, its political machines, its fiercely competitive journalism, its evangelical reformers, and its labor movement. In delving into Riis’s intellectual education and the lasting impact of *How the Other Half Lives*, Czitrom shows that though Riis argued for charity, not sociopolitical justice, the empathy that drove his work continues to inspire urban reformers today.

In the second half of the book, Yochelson describes for the first time Riis’s photographic practice: his initial reliance on amateur photographers to take the photographs he needed, his own use of the camera, and then his collecting of photographs by professionals, who by 1900 were documenting social reform efforts for government agencies and charities. She argues that while Riis is rightly considered a revolutionary in the history of photography, he was not a photographic artist. Instead, Riis was a writer and lecturer who first harnessed the power of photography to affect social change.

As staggering inequality continues to be an urgent political topic, this book, illustrated with nearly seventy of Riis’s photographs, will serve as a stunning reminder of what has changed, and what has not.

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