

MORE THAN THE DEAD KNOW

J O H N D A L Z I E L

Brooklyn:

The Once and Future City

By Thomas J. Campanella

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I APPROACHED PROFESSOR CAMPANELLA'S RICHLY DETAILED and illustrated history of Brooklyn with the perspective of a general reader who, while having merely the briefest personal experience of the borough, thought he had more than a passing familiarity with it from the literature and films it has inspired.

Consistent with his subjects of professional studies in urban planning and development, the author's prime focus is on the evolvement of New York's most densely populated borough: the formation of the suburbs, roads and parks, the rise and fall of buildings, the binding and eventual destruction of communities.

His concentration on the minutiae of details of the zoning and planning of developmental projects allows little space for more fully drawn portraits of many of the historical protagonists whose achievements, ambitions, and failures impact the lives of the ever expanding population, whose hope might have been, no matter their national or ethnic backgrounds, for no more than security and opportunity.

That hope finds expression in the brief glimpse into the history of Campanella's own family that he allows in the acknowledgements prefacing the book. In two long paragraphs he tells of his grandfather taking his family, in 1902, across the East River from Manhattan's East Side to escape a cholera outbreak, opening a barber shop in Coney Island and establishing roots from

which his children and extended family would, over the generations, become part of the greater Brooklyn story.

The barest details given of the lives and activities of the author's great-uncles, aunts, mother, and father, set against the background of ever changing environmental and social conditions, would have provided nourishment enough for such novelists as Dos Passos or the now forgotten Albert Halper.

Here, too, can be perceived small indications of influences that allow for the very occasional revealing of Professor Campanella's disapproval and judgment of the many actions and schemes that contributed to disappointment at a society's loss of potential and vitality as represented in such a place as his Brooklyn.

Restrained as he seems by the discipline of his scholarship in city planning, architecture and urban studies, it is not until the epilogue that he permits himself the indulgence of mourning the loss of neighborhoods; their 'essence, their identity, their soul,' and the encroachment of 'manufactured authenticity'. Brooklyn, he laments, "has become ground zero of gentrification in New York."

While not as passionately expressed as Pete Hamill in *Downtown: My Manhattan*, raging at the destruction of Penn Station, he does single out one Fred C. Trump's 1966 destruction of Coney Island's Pavilion of Fun, 'the last great example of Victorian Architecture in the United States', as "an act of vandalism."

The history of Brooklyn, as portrayed, allows limited time for nostalgia. Given the presentation of schemers, opportunists, the selfishly ambitious and piratically greedy entrepreneurs and a litany of "clear it . . . build it . . . tear it down . . . build it again," there should be little surprise at the vulnerability of beauty and prospects of permanence.

The second largest borough of New York City, the "western lump of that great glacial pile known as Long Island, now named Brooklyn, had been home to branches of the Leni Lenape Nation for a thousand years before the arrival of the Dutch in the Seventeenth Century."

By the mid 1860s, the remaining Lenape, who had survived two hundred years of European occupation and the Dutch resistance against the British, followed by the 1776 'patriots' revolutionary war would be, by U.S. government edict, removed to the so-called Indian Territories of Oklahoma.

In his first two chapters, Campanella unearths in forensic detail a his-

tory forged by displacement, war, and slavery that would contribute to the identification of Brooklyn as “The Borough of Cemeteries,” host to more than half of the burial places in the combined five boroughs of New York city.

One estimate of the achievement and value of a history such as he presents can be arrived at by the measures to which the general reader will be inspired to seek further information related to particular incidents and characters which the author has not pursued beyond the boundaries of his intent.

If those early chapters relate what is, after all, a sadly familiar narrative of early colonization and the varieties of exploitation imposed upon the land and its occupants, still, it is in the descriptions of several exceptional individuals and their achievements that the book is at its most engaging.

We meet Lady Deborah Moody who, in seeking liberation from the religious repression of the Puritans in the 1640s founded the Anabaptists community of Gravesend, the first such settlement known to be achieved by a woman.

An equally formidable woman is encountered in chapter six, appropriately titled “Isle of Offal and Bones.”

Situated at the South East of Brooklyn, Barren Island could be even more definitively named Hell Island; the setting, Campanella writes “of dark tales that make children hug tight their dogs and elders bring in the cat.”

Once the fishing and hunting grounds of the Lenape, the island was, from 1855, the site of industrial fish processing and what would become the largest waste processing plant in the world, receiving all the “night soil” and garbage of Manhattan and Brooklyn.

By the century’s end there were 130,000 workhorses in Manhattan. After lives of labor in service to the city’s economy and progress, most would sicken and die in stables and on the streets to be collected and loaded onto scows and shipped to Barren Island.

In 1889 alone it was recorded that 7,000 horses, near to 24,000 dogs and cats, thousands of cows, sheep, pigs, goats, and fowl were processed and rendered to fertilizer and multiple other uses and profitable products.

The workforce was such that a caste system evolved among the mix of African-Americans, immigrant Swedes, English, Irish and Prussians, who mostly lived in company owned boarding houses.

Such were the dehumanizing effects of the environment that those who

on the rare occasion would cross to Manhattan were, in 1878, with the support of the courts, effectively banned from public transport on the grounds that the system did not allow for “the transportation of smells.”

While true to the dispassionate tone that he employs throughout, Thomas Campanella frequently uses the subtle ironic comment or reference to contemporary reportage that communicates a prime interest in the human cost of the decisions and actions of the disparate and ever competing ambitious and powerful.

His portrayal of the feral hell-hole that “bred lawlessness and anarchy,” causing, in 1888, legal action to be instigated in Brooklyn against the rendering plants for inflicting grievous harm to “the health and welfare of the public,” only to be frustrated by the corruption of the courts and politicians, would have provided material capable of shocking even Upton Sinclair.

Yet, Campanella tells us, “life blossomed with weed-like vigor amidst the sand and garbage.” By 1910, the island, now home to 1500 people living in rudimentary dwellings and still lacking public services, police presence, and paved roads, did have two churches, a school, baths, a butcher, a baker, and a grocery store.

Conditions on the island had attracted attention from social reformists and agencies such as the North American Civic League for Immigrants. Immensely beneficial and progressive as the resulting improvements were, they were partly motivated by a concern that continuing neglect of basic human requirements would, in the words of an investigator for the Department of Labour, “provide the groundwork for rebellion and sedition.”

Such concerns were validated in 1913 when more than 500 workers, having been refused a raise in pay, took strike action, which closed one company plant for two weeks until strike breakers were used, resulting in violence and one shooting. 1918 saw the arrival of Jane Shaw, who Campanella allows himself to describe as the “redeemer who brought more joy to the long-scorned isle than a diamond ring pulled from the trash.”

“Lady” Jane Shaw, Guardian Angel of Barren Island, so to be named by the press at the time, was an experienced teacher sent by the public school system. Her positive presence stimulated a metamorphosis, and not only in the classroom. She went into homes to give cooking classes and encourage both the growing of vegetables and the raising of poultry. With a piano she herself provided, she conducted music lessons and arranged communal dances.

Skilled at lobbying as she must have been, she had the Red Cross send milk daily by police boat to be distributed by her pupils to the sick. After training with a Navy physician, she assumed the role of *de facto* doctor to the community where disease was decreasing.

Within ten years, her work had contributed beyond measure to the transforming of the Isle into what she, in a deserved self-indulgent display of lobbyist hyperbole, described as ‘the richest spot on Earth.’

The emerging nascent society, nourished so richly by its “counsellor, dictator, friend and champion,” would in 1920 see the beginning of what would eventually be its destruction.

In that year, the New York Sanitary Utilization Company ceased operations on the island, with the loss of jobs resulting in a declining population. The narrow creeks and salt marshes separating the island from Brooklyn was filled in and Flatbush Avenue was extended, thus gathering what Campanella describes as “the Hades of horsedom” to the greater Brooklyn.

The former island became the site of New York City’s first municipal airport in 1931, by which time little evidence of its dark history survived.

Robert Moses, the contentious parks commissioner for New York, ordered the remaining 400 Barren Island residents to be evicted from their rented homes in March 1936. Given fourteen days to leave, many of the families had lived there forty years and all were known to Jane Shaw.

Lady Jane’s intervention persuaded the city officials to grant a reprieve enabling her last class to graduate on the 30th of June. The school was closed down the next morning.

Jane Shaw died in 1939, by which time no trace of the community she had transformed remained. The locations of her school and village, together with the toxic rendering plants, are now absorbed into a National Recreation Area and, by ironic symbiosis, a wildlife sanctuary.

Allowing that, in consideration of the scope of Professor Campanella’s history, I have given disproportionate attention to Barren Island and Jane Shaw, I yet believe justification can be claimed for an attempt to find a core of thematic unity in what is fundamentally an episodic narrative.

The account of Barren Island contains, in concentrated form, most of the recurring threads that bind the stories of the designing of roadways and the erection and destruction of amusement parks, racetracks and hotels, the unrealized dreams of great buildings to doomed public housing.

Finally, in a world that allows too many Robert Moses' and Fred Trumps to attain power and too few Jane Shaws, Thomas Campanella's message of the failures and destructive results of the misguided and, at times, venal implementation of short sighted and profit motivated urban renewal projects needs to be heeded in many more places than his still loved Brooklyn.