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Child Labor in America: A History by Chaim M. Rosenberg

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Child Labor in America: A History is psychiatrist Chaim Rosenberg's sweeping account of children who toiled as canners, messengers, sellers, shiners, cleaners, pickers, sowers, bellhops, cutters, and spinners in English, colonial, and American history. While much of what he describes will be familiar to historians of U.S. labor or the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, the book is a worthwhile reminder of the breadth of our nations' past (and even continued) reliance on the low wages, long days, and physical ordeals of working children.

Child Labor in America is organized into nineteen brief, thematically titled chapters that describe the mills, mines, farms, seas, and wars where children labored, and that depict the interventions of Florence Kelley, Lillian Wald, Lewis Hines, and Francis Perkins who led well-publicized campaigns against child labor. Hines's photographs, sprinkled throughout, enhance the text. While Rosenberg's readable book is rich in description, his evidence base seems sparse. He tells a national story, but relies heavily on coverage in the *New York Times*. He also neglects contemporary child labor and juvenile historiography. For instance, Rosenberg's chapter "Health and Education of Working Children" should probably have cited Stephen Lassonde's seminal work on education in New England. His chapter "The Legal Battle" might engage with David Tanenhaus's work on juveniles and the law.[1]

Some of Rosenberg's chapters work better than others. For instance, chapter 9, "Distributing the News," which reviews the labors of messengers and newsboys, nicely describes the illustrious 1899 strike when "Kid Blink" (Louis Ballatt) led a short-lived, but thousands-strong, newsboy strike in New York against Joseph Pulitzer and William Hearst. However, the next chapter, "City Work," which covers domestic service, office boys, "pin" boys, bellboys, flower girls, bootblacks, hawkers, and chimney sweeps, appears random in its subject matter. The disconnectedness of the "City Work" chapter speaks to a problem that runs throughout the book: individual chapters correspond with the book's topic, but they do not appear to connect to each other; they do not come together to deepen and elaborate a new understanding of child labor.

The descriptive material in *Child Labor in America* should enhance its appeal to general interest readers and undergraduate students. However, the absence of a central, organizing argument or historiographical engagement will likely limit its appeal among scholars. It is missing features that historians expect in monographs. Rosenberg does not--in any significant sense--develop gendered or racial analyses of child labor,

explain how courts evolved or restricted thinking about child labor, or elaborate on the role of the state in negotiating the relationship between child labor and industry. Rosenberg's commitment to the child labor ordeals of well-known historical figures is also problematic. By telling readers that figures like Andrew Carnegie, Thomas Hancock, Samuel Gompers, and "Buffalo Bill" Cody were child workers who became fabulously wealthy or successful, Rosenberg appears to diminish the viciousness, violence, and cruelty of child labor. His frequent referral to Horatio Alger's fictional "Ragged Dick"--a serial that endorsed a puerile narrative of upward mobility from childhood poverty--compounds this tendency to understate the ordeal of child labor. Rosenberg's amassing of instances of child labor makes for good reading. But his failure to meaningfully distinguish between the activism of reformers like Kelly, the harsh everyday conditions of child labor, and the fictional and self-serving mythmaking of men like Alger and Carnegie bring him perilously close to affirming a narrative in which child labor liberates.

Note

[1]. Stephen Lassonde, "Learning and Earning: Schooling, Juvenile Employment, and the Early Life Course in Late Nineteenth-Century New Haven," *Journal of Social History* 29 (Summer 1996): 839-870; and David Tanenhaus, *Juvenile Justice in the Making* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).