THE EUCLID AVENUE SAGA

More Questions

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Jan Cigliano’s paper, "Euclid Avenue: A Linear Neighborhood of Grandeur," is further evidence of what these annual Western Reserve Studies Symposia also make abundantly clear—the vitality and increasingly sophisticated scholarship about the city of Cleveland and, more generally, the Western Reserve as a whole. Drawn from her larger study, Showplace of America: Cleveland’s Euclid Avenue, 1850-1910 (1991), Ms. Cigliano’s paper combines in an effective and interesting fashion aspects of social, economic and architectural history. Like the Group Plan and the Terminal Tower complex in the early twentieth century, Euclid Avenue was to symbolize the power and wealth of industrial Cleveland and the leading men, indeed the leading families, who had created it. Conscious that their fortunes had been made only recently, they sought to build an environment which, based on the grand boulevards of Europe, would drape what they perhaps feared was the evidence of crude money-grubbing by raw "nouveaux riches" with the elegance, grandeur and sophistication of the European and, also, the American aristocracy in Boston, New York and Philadelphia. Relying on prominent architects and filling their interiors with furnishings and art appropriate to their newly-earned wealth and status, all brought to life in Ms. Cigliano’s lavishly illustrated book, these Clevelanders were clearly making a statement.
As Ms. Cigliano points out, however, the history of magnificent Euclid Avenue is replete with irony—the very prosperity that prompted and, indeed, permitted its creation also laid the foundations for its decline and eventual disappearance. The industrial soot and smoke which had intruded on the neighborhood from the very beginning and the steady movement of commerce eastward along the Avenue from downtown made life on "millionaires row" increasingly unpleasant at the same time that the steadily mounting property values made it prudent to sell, naturally at a significant profit, and move to the still country-like suburbs farther east from the city's core. The results for Cleveland and its architectural heritage were, of course, tragic. In a city where land-use ordinances were few and far between and where interest in historic preservation was minimal (a situation common throughout the United States at the time), the magnificent residences were soon levelled and replaced, all in an uncoordinated fashion, with ugly commercial structures. Having said this, however, we must be leery of being overly critical of our predecessors. When they were torn down, many of the structures were not "historic" and our own records of enlightened preservation is not without blemish.

The evolution of Euclid Avenue is of course more than the story of the architecture and symbolism of the built environment. It is also about people, about Cleveland Society and its values. These wealthy Clevelanders did business with one another, their children went to school together, they socialized in their clubs and in one another's homes, they intermarried. And they shared a common outlook. Ms Cigliano tellingly notes, for examples, Eleanor Hale Bolton's successful Cake Walk Party led by red mother hubbards with "blackened" faces, arms, and necks followed by her Dickens Party in 1889 attended by 100 of the city's prominent society people in disguise. The juxtaposition of a "blackface" party followed by a Dickens gala is arresting, to say the least. What we have in Ms. Cigliano's paper and in greater and fascinating detail in her book is history of the "upstairs", natural product of the available sources. Ms. Cigliano has used to great effect not only public records and newspapers, but particularly important, the often hard-to-find private diaries, letters and reminiscences of the individuals themselves. It is her reliance and skillful use of these private sources that makes her book so informative and, particularly significant when so much history is dreary and dull, so enjoyable to read.

What we do not know much about, however, is the "downstairs" part of the story. Who were the servants—the housemaids and cooks, the grooms and, later, the chauffeurs, and the gardeners? Who were the Cleveland equivalents of Hudson, Rose and Mrs. Bridges of Upstairs/Downstairs fame? How were they recruited; how were they paid, fed
and housed; what did the servants think and what were their goals; how did they and their employers interact? Were they Irish, German, Polish, African-American? Catholic or Protestant? Did anyone care? Did the proportions of servants in a household defined by nationality and religion change over time? Why? Although the diaries and letters of the elite frequently comment on servants and thus provide considerable first-hand information on the subject, the fact is that we know far less about "downstairs" than we do about "upstairs." Perhaps some hard-working graduate student will undertake the difficult task of unearthing their history.

Ms. Cigliano's paper and book thus provide clear evidence both of how far the writing of Cleveland history has recently come and of the sorts of tasks that await us. Ponder some of the important books about Cleveland which have appeared over the past decade--David D. Van Tassel and John Grabowski's The Encyclopedia of Cleveland History (1987) and their Cleveland, A Tradition of Reform (1986); Leslie A. Pina's Louis Rorimer, A Man of Style (1990); Gary E. Polster's Inside Looking Out, The Cleveland Jewish Orphan Asylum, 1868-1924 (1990); Harry F. Lupold and Gladys Haddad's Ohio's Western Reserve, A Regional Reader (1988); and Walter Leedy's forthcoming book on the construction and significance of the Terminal Tower. I should also note the recent publication of Frederick C. Howe's The Confessions of a Reformer (1925, 1988), Harlan Hatcher's The Western Reserve, The Story of New Connecticut in Ohio (1949, 1991) and William Ganson Rose's Cleveland, The Making of a City(1950,1990)

However, to coin the phrase historians always use at conferences, "much remains to be done." In addition to the "downstairs" of Euclid Avenue's residents, for example, we know comparatively little about Cleveland's numerous immigrant groups, both individually and in a comparative perspective. There are precious few scholarly or even popular biographies of the business leaders Ms. Cigliano discusses; there are few histories of the enterprises they founded and from which they drew the resources to develop Euclid Avenue; we know comparatively little about the laborers whom they employed—the conditions of their labor, what they were paid, and their lives outside the workplace, including their recreation and family life. And everyone here undoubtedly has a favorite subject in need of scholarly attention. If Ms. Cigliano's paper and monograph provide a reliable indicator, as I hope and believe that they do, we can all look forward to a bright future for the historiography of Cleveland its environs.