

## Crying the News: A History of America's Newsboys

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## BOOK REVIEW

DiGirolamo, Vincent. *Crying the News: A History of America's Newsboys*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019, 712 pp., \$34.49 (hardcover).

Vincent DiGirolamo's *Crying the News: A History of America's Newsboys* is a monumental, 712-page book that affords a vast panorama of the newspaper industry's "most marginal workers" (2). Tracing five generations of newsboys from their rise in the 1830s with the penny press to their precarity in the 1930s due to the Great Depression, the book draws upon a breathtaking array of primary sources, including archival manuscript materials, autobiographies, engravings, films, government and industry documents, memoirs, magazines, newsboy club minutes, newspapers, oral histories, paintings, photographs, and reform organization reports, to present newsboys in their cultural, economic, political, and social aspects across the American landscape.

DiGirolamo follows their migrations and work on the transportation routes and vehicles connecting far-flung parts of the industrializing nation. Organized in three parts, "Children of the Penny, 1833–1865," "Children of the Breach, 1866–1899," and "Children of the State, 1900–1940," the book situates newsboys in the march of history from the country's economic takeoff, to the rupture between labor and capital, to government interventions into laboring children's welfare. Within this socio-economic tripartite structure, the volume also considers how newsboys were represented, often fancifully, in arts and letters. Accordingly, *Crying the News* is monumental, too, in its lavish illustrations, including thirty-three color plates and 145 half-tones sprinkled throughout its fourteen chapters and conclusion, which constitute a virtual encyclopedia of visual images that represent both lived experience and mythic idealizations of American newsboys.

DiGirolamo recognizes that "newsboys were both historical and archetypal figures" who "came to personify American character and exemplify the Franklinian virtues of honesty, industry, and thrift," while demonstrating the "mythic, Algeresque ability to rise 'upward and onward,' to overcome and even benefit from poverty" (4). He declares that his "aim is not simply to distinguish history from myth but to explore the dialectical relationship between the two" (4). Consequently, in these pages, rags-to-riches stories abound, along with countless names of famous people who were once newsboys. But he juxtaposes these with accounts of violence against newsboys, their poverty, resistance to Progressive reforms, participation in strikes against newspapers, and unionization. To explain the tension between myth and reality, DiGirolamo argues that newsboys "came to personify the spirit of capitalism in America because of their low-rung ubiquity, not in spite of it," and that their upward social mobility "served to reinforce the legitimacy of the capitalist order" (4). DiGirolamo does not always differentiate myth from history and often moves too easily between the two, as the narrative sometimes careens from one fact or anecdote to another with minimal analysis. His attention to both the positive and negative sides of newsboys' lived experiences, however, and their varying complicity with and resistance to capitalism, makes for a well-balanced book that refuses to romanticize its subjects.

This is the first comprehensive book about American newsboys. They have only been principally treated in book chapters and journal articles mostly by social historians, and not, surprisingly, journalism historians. One precedent, David Nasaw's *Children of the City* (1985), which inspired the 1992 Disney musical film, *Newsies*, uses similar sources but focuses on the 1900s and 1910s, and treats newsboys alongside other street children. A "history of print capitalism from the pavement up" that "chronicles the rise of the American press," DiGirolamo's book, beyond its wider scope, contains more than Nasaw's for journalism

historians (2). It features the newspaper industry's movers and shakers (such as James Gordon Bennett, Horace Greeley, William Randolph Hearst, and Joseph Pulitzer) and their social impact through their newspapers' human distribution system. Newsboys' role in 1890s Yellow Journalism, especially during the Spanish American War, is discussed more fully than in most histories. The many accounts of sometimes obscure strikes and labor actions offer new information for scholars interested in the political economy of news. DiGirolamo also provides insights into the effects that emerging technologies like counting and sorting devices or bicycles and motorized vehicles had on carriers and hawkers. While the hefty, detail-laden volume might be too lengthy for the classroom, its pages can enrich lectures.

Some of the book's significance lies in its attention to news vendors sidestepped by the titular word, *Newsboys*. This is also a history of newsgirls and women, *newsmen* in their late teens and beyond, and adult news-carriers and circulation managers. Insofar as these and the book's many African American distributors elude the word "newsboy" for the iconic success story it signals, their presence serves to complicate and deepen the author's thesis. While this diversity is under-represented in the understandably truncated subject index, it registers with even a light perusal of the book, and can inspire future work on issues surrounding race, gender, and wageless adult labor in news selling.

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