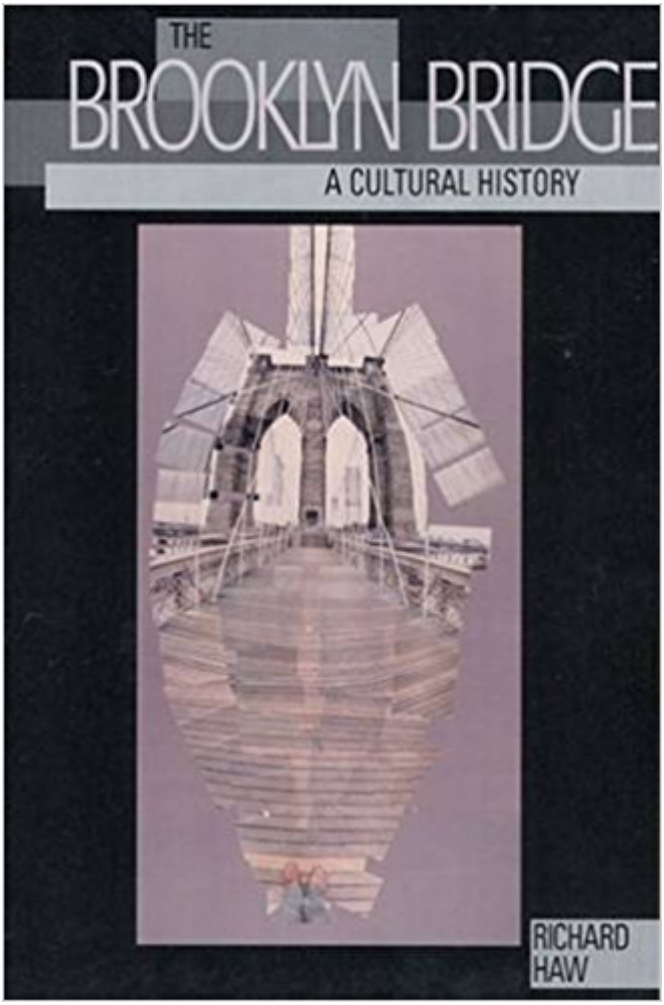
The Brooklyn Bridge: A Cultural History (Rivergate Regionals Collection)



Synopsis

Hailed by some as the Eighth Wonder of the World when it opened in 1883, the Brooklyn Bridge is one of the world's most recognizable and beloved icons. For over one hundred years it has excited and fascinated with stories of ingenuity and heroism, and it has been endorsed as a flawless symbol of municipal improvement and a prime emblem of American technological progress. Despite its impressive physical presence, however, Brooklyn's grand old bridge is much more than a testament of engineering and architectural achievement. As Richard Haw shows in this first of its kind cultural history, the Brooklyn Bridge owes as much to the imagination of the public as it does to the historical events and technical prowess that were integral to its construction. Bringing together more than sixty images of the bridge that, over the years, have graced postcards, magazine covers, and book jackets and appeared in advertisements, cartoons, films, and photographs, Haw traces the diverse and sometimes jarring ways in which this majestic structure has been received, adopted, and interpreted as an American idea. Haw's account is not a history of how the bridge was made, but rather of what people have made of the Brooklyn Bridge - in film, music, literature, art, and politics - from its opening ceremonies to the blackout of 2003. Classic accounts from such writers and artists as H.G. Wells, Charles Reznikoff, Hart Crane, Lewis Mumford, Joseph Pennell, Walker Evans, and Georgia O'Keeffe, among many others, present the bridge as a deserted, purely aestheticized romantic ideal, while others, including Henry James, Joseph Stella, Yun Gee, Ernest Poole, Alfred Kazin, Paul Auster, and Don DeLillo, offer a counter-narrative as they question not only the role of the bridge in American society, but its function as a profoundly public, communal place. Also included are never-before-published photographs by William Gedney and a discussion of Alexis Rockman's provocative new mural Manifest Destiny. Drawing on hundreds of cultural artifacts, from the poignant, to the intellectual, to the downright quirky, The Brooklyn Bridge sheds new light on topics such as ethnic and foreign responses to America, nationalism, memory, parade culture, commemoration, popular culture, and post-9/11 America icons. In the end, we realize that this impressive span is as culturally remarkable today as it was technologically and physically astounding in the nineteenth century.

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Customer Reviews

"In the most important work on the Brooklyn Bridge in a generation, Richard Haw shows how and why it remains a central but contested American icon." - David E. Nye, author of America as Second Creation: Technology and Narratives of New Beginnings"

About the Author Richard Haw completed his Ph.D. in his hometown at the University of Leeds before permanently settling in New York. He is a professor of literature and writing at CUNY's John Jay College of Criminal Justice.

For students of U.S. cultural history, Richard Haw’s THE BROOKLYN BRIDGE offers a complete, and engagingly written interpretation of the cultural meanings and materials inspired and evoked by this iconic American structure. Those who work in cultural studies would be wise to acquire this book, not only for Haw’s superlative treatment of the bridge’s cultural history, but because Mr. Haw also identifies and nimbly employs the discipline’s key theoretical texts. His end notes are especially detailed and useful.Mr. Haw seems to have read or viewed every cultural text that references the bridge and this extensive scholarship is laudable. At the same time, Mr. Haw, whose main theme is officialdom’s exclusion of countervailing interpretations and histories of the bridge, should have given more thought to excluding some of the minor works he cites. True, there are works once thought to be minor whose reputations have waxed over time and vice versa. In addition, minor works can be employed to exemplify important insights, a strategy Mr. Haw uses very effectively, but a more rigorous selection of such minor works would have served to sharpen this history with little cost to it comprehensiveness. But this is a minor quibble.As Mr. Haw’s relates the official and non-official versions of the bridge’s history and the meanings ascribed to it, he shows how official versions, such as the opening day speeches, present an idealized bridge freighted with high civic

aspirations - democracy, social and economic justice, etc. -- but actually exclude the voice of the average citizen and worker, and not just from the speeches and images, but from the ceremonies, too. He notes, for instance, that the opening day ceremony on May 24, 1883, as subsequent 50th and centennial celebrations, it was only government and business elites who interpreted the bridge's meanings and walked its walkway during the ceremonies.On opening day, for instance, the mostly Irish immigrant men who built the bridge were excluded from the ceremony. Earlier, they had protested the fact that the date coincided with Queen Victoria's birthday. When they asked for the event to be rescheduled, the organizers refused and called in extra police to quell a potential disturbance (which did not materialize). Contrast this with the opening of the Ead bridge across the Mississippi in St. Louis 10 years before, an occasion where workers, citizens and city officials all participated in a massive 15 mile parade across the bridge. In the 1983 ceremony, which I personally observed from a tightly policed East Side highway along with thousands of other average New Yorkers, the more well-heeled citizens, those who could afford a $500 ticket were enjoying back-stage access to New York's other movers and shakers, where they could drink complimentary cocktails well away from lesser mortals.This points up another of Haw's observations: the exclusionary tactics of Brooklyn Bridge's opening day ceremony where the average citizen participates only as a distant spectator has been the ruling condition of such events ever since. As Haw points out, this is an era in American history where the conditions of mass industrialization and the concomitant exploitation of workers was rampant, where, in the years immediately following, "strike actions would sweep through Jay Gould's expansive railroad network, and troops would be dispatched to the streets of Cincinnati. In just two years, the Haymarket affair would divide the nation. At this time of national crisis, the men responsible for the bridge's opening manufactured an image that blurred the realities of life in America and sponsored a wholly conservative vision. At the day's speeches, amelioration was less the promise than the desired effect" (page 32). Mr. Haw suggests that opening day was perhaps the first public relations event, or citing Daniel Boorstin's construction, the first pseudo-event, the beginning of the society of the spectacle.Mr. Haw's discussion of Walker Evans' Depression era photographs of the bridge offers an example of how most depictions of the bridge serve the official version of reality. This version makes reference to the soaring aspirations of the American people, suggests that only a free people could build such a marvelous structure, that it is in keeping with Americans' innovative and daring spirit that the world's first suspension bridge was built in America, etc. So, unlike the powerfully affecting Evans' photographs of destitute farm families in the 30s Dustbowl, when he photographed the bridge Evans captured the socially approved version empty of individuals, a modernist emblem of the

"technological sublime" to which people need not apply, except perhaps as witnesses kept well off-stage.Haw makes brief reference to the "New Criticism" as a parallel manifestation of the modernist sensibility which preferred aestheticized interpretations of texts and provided readings shorn of social context, sealed off from an examination the political and economic arrangements. Having been schooled, albeit sloppily, in the New Criticism, I can attest to the powerful attraction of the method as entrÃƒÂ©e to an intellectual priesthood. I am also aware that because the method mostly treats the surface of works that yields mostly surface insights. It was perhaps the most politically acceptable method for American intellectuals at mid-century, a time when to question the political orthodoxies of the Cold War was to invite blacklisting. And so we of the next generation were taught to look at the urn and its well-wroughtness, and not to wonder at the circumstances that supported or impeded its manufacture.Until I read THE BROOKLYN BRIDGE, I was not aware of the place the bridge occupies in the firmament of America's civic religion. Mr. Haw convinced me of its importance as a sign of the plutocratic takeover of America political and economic system, the first "revolution of the bosses," a reprise of which we are experiencing today. Indeed Mr. Haw obliquely suggests that there are many parallels between the late 19th, late 20th and early 21st centuries, that the cynical coupling of exclusionary tactics and inclusionary rhetoric practiced on opening day continue to be employed now with an ever more cynical intent and to greater and more pernicious effect.

This is a brilliant book. I see the bridge once a month or so and I've walked over the bridge a dozen or so times. I've always loved it, but now I feel such a deeper connection to it. Can't wait to walk over it again with all these wonderful stories buzzing through my head. What a joy this book is.

Back in 1983 when I was 15 I threw a full-scale protest against attending the Brooklyn Bride centennial birthday celebration. "I don't care about the bridge, I hate Brooklyn and I don't like birthday parties", I fumed before storming off back home. (I ended up watching the fireworks and accompanying commentary by then Mayor Ed Koch on TV). My position on the bridge has since softened but only to the point of gentle ambivalence. I wondered why am I such a crank to such a beloved icon (or is it a monument? I'll have to check with homeland security).Richard Haw looks at a series of cultural and historical sources to show us how the bridge's history has been gilded over more times than it has been painted; and people like me are not mere party poopers but members of a long tradition of dissenters (as well as assenters) who have help to build the bridge into an international icon long since the final bolt was fastened into place.Central to Haw's understanding of

bridge is the footpath as a unique urban street and the experience of the pedestrian or cyclist crossing it. Starting on the Brooklyn side, the walker rises out of the dirt and exhaust of Tillary Street and downtown Brooklyn into the clear air above the bridge's roadways. Between the arches, the walker is elevated above the skyscrapers of lower Manhattan - alone at the top - before descending into the chaos and anonymity of lower Manhattan. On summer days the bridge serves as a parade ground for legions of tourists.Haw's relationship with the bridge is complicated and his pursuit of information that might clarify or nuance his position is obsessive. He has studied the bridge through paintings of well-known artists and obscure romance novels, he collects memorabilia from special events, monitors construction, and culls through historical material zealously. All in an effort strip away the malarkey perpetrated by a long line of bridge boosters and elevate the voices of those on the losing end of the span's mighty reign. He is not afraid to use Washington Roebling's words to darken the hagiographic image of John Roebling who aside from his great achievements also seemed to be imperious, a wacko and a sadist.Likewise the opening chapter tells how the bridge's inauguration was boycotted by the Irish workers, slighted the engineers in favor of dignitaries, corralled the general public in holding pens until midnight (at which point they were allowed to cross they were obliged to pay the toll); the event was so well whitewashed that even press reports upgraded the weather conditions on that day.Haw's final chapter, in which he chronicles the recent past, is the strongest. It is here where the brunt of his analysis jumps out of the realm of the theoretical and is applied the great events like the blackout, September 11th, 2001 and the very hare-brained quasi-plot to bring down the bridge by applying a acetlyne torch to the bridge cables. In events like these, the bridge is reclaimed as a thorough fare for expression of free people, and in times like these, we can certainly use it.

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