

REVIEW ESSAY

BEYOND THE FURNACE: CONCRETE, CONSERVATION, AND COMMUNITY IN POSTINDUSTRIAL PITTSBURGH

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*F*ranklin Toker, *Pittsburgh: A New Portrait* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009. xv, 512 pp.: illus. [some color], color maps. Hardcover, \$34.95)

Edward K. Muller, ed. *An Uncommon Passage: Traveling through History on the Great Allegheny Passage Trail*. Photographs by Paul G. Wiegman. (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009. xii, 290 pp.: illus. [some color]. Hardcover, \$34.95)

The year 2009 was especially significant for Pittsburgh. The city had just celebrated its 250th anniversary with a year-long series of concerts, parades, and other public spectacles. Among these were renovations to the iconic Point State Park, the completion of the Great Allegheny Passage bicycle trail to Cumberland, Maryland, and a “Parade of Champions” at the Senator John Heinz History Center featuring the legends of Pittsburgh sports. City leaders saw in these festivities an opportunity for fostering

“improved regional perceptions of Pittsburgh” and “defining a vision for our region’s future.” The marketing blitz paid quick and unexpected dividends when in May the Obama administration announced the community would host an upcoming G20 Summit. The president’s emphasis on “the green economy” meshed perfectly with the booster narrative of Pittsburgh as “a great poster child [for] economic transformation.” Combined with the Steelers’ Super Bowl victory and the Penguins winning the National Hockey League’s Stanley Cup, by the end of the year residents of the ‘Burgh had plenty to justify claims that they were back from the ruins of deindustrialization.¹

Though marked by less fanfare, 2009 also witnessed the publication of two fascinating books by the University of Pittsburgh Press that drew heavily on these same themes of economic and environmental transformation. Designed explicitly for an audience beyond the confines of the academy, Franklin Toker’s *Pittsburgh: A New Portrait* and Edward K. Muller’s edited volume, *An Uncommon Passage: Travelling through History on the Great Allegheny Passage Trail*, are also of importance to scholars for their insight into the process of community and regional regeneration in the postindustrial era. Each text spans nearly 300 years of history, and they suggest both the opportunities and the difficulties in weaving together multiple themes and sites of urban, suburban, and rural development into a coherent narrative. The books thus resonate with recent environmental and urban history scholarship, such as David Stradling’s *Making Mountains: New York City and the Catskills* (2007), Matthew Klinge’s *Emerald City: An Environmental History of Seattle* (2007), and Anthony Penna’s *Remaking Boston: An Environmental History of the City and Its Surroundings* (2009).

Taken together, Toker and the contributors to *An Uncommon Passage* provide readers a nuanced portrait of a region extending from the central city to the farthest reaches of its countryside. The books are linked by an explicit analytical focus on the adaptive reuse of physical infrastructure, whether natural or artificial, for contemporary needs. The transformation of derelict train tracks into well-used bicycle paths is a key example of this process. “Abandoned railroad tracks,” Muller argues, offer “the ideal venue [for] biking . . . and in the process redefine the role of the Great Allegheny Passage in the postindustrial economy” (8). Toker similarly concludes, “the speed with which Pittsburgh can reinvent itself may be best exemplified by bicycling. Bikers in other cities know of Pittsburgh’s excellent cycling, and at least a few have moved here just for that reason” (29). Using the contemporary landscape as their starting point, both volumes dig beneath the

surface to find what Kevin Patrick describes in his chapter, “The Spirit of the Passage: Where Past and Future Meet,” in *An Uncommon Passage* as the “ghosts of the past and remnant bits of historic landscape [with which we] share the stage” (201).

Of the two books, *An Uncommon Passage* is much shorter and written in a narrative style free of jargon that will appeal to casual readers. The Great Allegheny Passage trail extends for 150 miles across the spine of the Appalachian Mountains, bringing together the cultures and ecologies of the Mid-Atlantic and the Midwest. Following an uncommonly good introductory overview by Muller, conservationist and photographer Paul Wiegman takes the reader on a whirlwind tour through more than 400 million years of geologic history written in the rock like “pages of a book [with] text that has been pushed, pulled and otherwise shaped by continental forces” (22). Wiegman’s skilled prose does a wonderful job of rendering accessible complex scientific ideas, while at the same time connecting natural processes to specific landmarks along the trail, such as the recently refurbished Hot Metal Bridge across the Monongahela River (51).

The next three chapters map out the region’s history from the imperial wars of the late colonial era through Anglo-American conquest and the rise of industrialization in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Martin West, director of the Fort Ligonier historical site, frames his analysis in terms of the need to find the “Best Passage through the Mountains” during the struggle for control of the Ohio’s headwaters. Jennifer Ford’s chapter on settlement picks up on this theme of competing transportation routes, while also devoting considerable space to the architecture of log homes and barns, which could be of use to travelers looking for surviving structures along the trail route. Rounding out this middle portion of the book, Robert Gangewere systematically and elegantly details the development of railroads and the rise of coal, the formation of the Frick and Carnegie empires, and worker culture, ending with a nice transitional conclusion foreshadowing the decline of the steel industry.

The third portion of the book encompasses a pair of essays on the evolution of the region in the twentieth century. Kevin Patrick, a professor of geography and regional planning at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, creates a visceral sensation of past and present together by explaining the layers of human-nature interaction experienced by the contemporary leisure traveler. Patrick focuses on Ohiopyle, a town near the trail’s midpoint that

has long been a popular tourist destination due its namesake waterfall on the Youghiogheny River (known as the “Yough”). In Patrick’s telling, Pittsburgh retailer Edgar Kaufmann Sr. served as the link “between the [rail-oriented] tourism of the Yough’s past . . . and the tourism of the Yough’s automobile-oriented future, which has come to rely on environmental conservation and preservation” (211–12). He also pays particular attention to the rise of whitewater rafting, which grew from 5,000 participants in 1968 to 95,000 ten years later. Today, four outfitters guide 150,000 tourists down the lower Yough annually, making Ohiopyle the most popular whitewater destination in the nation.

Paul Wiegman returns for the book’s final chapter on the creation of the Great Allegheny Passage trail itself. This is particularly fitting because he served as an officer of the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy in 1972 when the Western Maryland Railway announced plans to discontinue operations, opening the possibility for a trail that would connect Pittsburgh with the C&O Canal trail and thus to Washington, D.C. From his vantage as both participant and observer, Wiegman is ideally placed to sort the complex issues that delayed the completion of the trail for more than a quarter of a century. With only small parts of the route acquired initially, it was a long, slow process of recreating the right-of-way during a period that also saw the collapse of the region’s industrial base. The book ends by looking forward to the Pittsburgh 250 celebration and the completion of the few remaining gaps in the route.

Pittsburgh: A New Portrait also uses the massive deindustrialization of the 1980s as a point of departure for what Toker describes as “a conversation among Pittsburghers . . . about the workings of a great but often overlooked city” (x). The current volume is an expanded update of the well-known *Pittsburgh: An Urban Portrait*, first published in 1986. An architectural historian by training, Toker has tried to limit the more technical aspects of his study in favor of an “evocation of Pittsburgh as an urban experience” (ix). Nevertheless, those like me who cannot readily distinguish between a cornice and corned beef (the former is a decorative element above a door or window, the latter is on the menu at Primanti Bros. for \$6.29) must make a decision early on either to keep a dictionary handy or else let the often-obscure terminology flow by in a pleasant, half-understood stream. The book’s introduction, “Pittsburgh from the Ground Up,” provides an excellent overview of Pittsburgh history with reference to buildings that survive from each

period. It also offers a very good academic introduction to the concept of “space,” while connecting theoretical ideas about the sociological process of community construction to examples from specific neighborhoods.

Toker’s discussion of the downtown “Golden Triangle” begins appropriately with an overview of the postwar Pittsburgh Renaissance and its successor in the early 1980s. As with *An Uncommon Passage*, the multiple connections between the urban core and the rural periphery become immediately apparent, with Edgar Kaufmann Sr. once again a key player.² In surveying the work of modernist designer Benno Janssen, Toker highlights the retail magnate’s “importance as a patron of architecture for many years before he built Fallingwater” (64). While looking at “three different ideologies of renewal” in the gritty North Side neighborhood of Manchester, Toker also demonstrates brilliance in coaxing compelling stories from the fabric of the built environment on even the most mundane-seeming blocks (131). This interweaving of architectural description, engaged storytelling, and passionate advocacy for adaptive reuse continues in coverage of the South Side, which the author dubs “Real Pittsburgh.” He finds much to admire, for example, in one mixed-use redevelopment of a defunct steel mill—“SouthSide Works’ density, its integration with the preexisting street grid, its assimilation of the dominant old architectural forms, and its stress on urban versus suburban features has made it an authentic Pittsburgh neighborhood, despite its artificially accelerated pace of development” (171).

The two chapters in the book’s middle take transportation corridors as their departure points. “Penn Avenue: First Foundries and First Suburbs” walks the reader through Pittsburgh’s history by following the Monongahela Plain—the level remains of the river’s previous route—from its base on the waterfront to the bluffs on the city’s eastern end. “Fifth Avenue: Uphill and Upscale” examines the city’s other traditional thoroughfare, first by climbing “The Hill,” the city’s historically black neighborhood, and then driving through the leafy streetcar suburbs of Shadyside, Squirrel Hill, and Greenfield. Toker rounds out his portrait of Pittsburgh proper with an examination of Oakland, the city’s cultural Acropolis and home to three universities. Beginning with the desire of the city’s elite to transform the “Smoky City” imagery depicted in the 1909 Pittsburgh Survey, he carries us through architect Franklin Felix Nicola’s “transformation of Mary Schenley’s cowfields into Pittsburgh’s ‘City Beautiful’” (321). Among many beautifully detailed portraits of well-known landmarks such as the Carnegie museums,

the Cathedral of Learning, and the Phipps Conservatory, the author shows his intimate knowledge of the area with a discussion of Flagstaff Hill in Schenley Park, “an artificially banked-up amphitheatre [and] the city’s premier spot for kiting on windy days” (350).

Having thus provided industrial and postindustrial bookends to the story of the city proper, Toker turns his attention to the rest of the region. It is here, I believe, that the book makes some of its most important contributions to the existing canon of Pittsburgh scholarship. “The River Towns: Valleys of Industry” covers those areas hardest hit by the collapse of steel, while the book’s final chapter tackles the dramatic growth of the hilltop commuter suburbs. The focus in both chapters is firmly on the successes, failures, and possibilities of community revitalization through architectural design. The author sees in the creation of a National Historic Park of the Steel Industry around the “mesmerizing remains” of the Carrie Furnaces an attraction “destined to become the single most riveting site for visitors to Pittsburgh” (395). On the other hand, Toker is clearly disappointed with the Waterfront, a mixed-use development on the site of another iconic steel mill, which unlike the SouthSide Works was not well integrated into its surrounding neighborhoods leaving them to “languish in unemployment and decay” (392). Significantly, he applies these same insights to the less-known communities of Braddock and McKees Rocks, where it is their “architectural and industrial heritage that makes [them] memorable, so [their] old buildings necessarily play a major role in any economic revival” (399).

An Uncommon Passage and *Pittsburgh: A New Portrait* thus present visions of the contemporary metropolitan region that are both accessible and innovative. From the urban core to the rural periphery, these carefully constructed volumes lead readers both casual and scholarly on a detailed tour through time and space. In each, beautiful photography is seamlessly meshed with engaging prose presented by narrators with detailed knowledge of their subject matter. Just as Muller and his collaborators give the reader an intimate look at the making and remaking of the Great Allegheny Passage trail, Toker’s in-depth knowledge of neighborhoods from Manchester to Monroeville provides tremendous insight into the evolving form and function of urban space. As with Wiegman’s analysis of the early years of trail development, Toker also occasionally inserts himself into the narrative, such as in 1990 when “ignoring [Toker’s] own personal plea” a property owner demolished a building in the historic Allegheny Arsenal designed by Benjamin Henry Latrobe in 1813 (207–8).

Each book does have its limitations, though, which are due in part to the difficulties in telling a coherent regional narrative in an area as diverse as metropolitan Pittsburgh. It has been fifteen years since the last attempt to craft such a synthesis for the post-steel era and thus the present volumes do help to fill a gap in the existing scholarly literature.³ Taking into account the patchiness of a multiple-author format, Muller actually does a better editorial job of crafting and maintaining an overarching analytical framework than Toker, whose chapters function more as stand-alone essays. Indeed, despite its tremendous advantages, *Pittsburgh: A New Portrait* does not fully realize the author's stated ambition to "write a book that could be read cover to cover rather than picked at like a reference book" (xiii), with often perfunctory transitions both within and between chapters and little in the way of a conclusion. That said, these are both wonderful books that will have readers packing them along with their bicycles and binoculars as they make their way to the 'Burgh.

NOTES

1. Allegheny Conference on Community Development, "Pittsburgh 250 Blows Out Birthday Candles on Year-Long Celebration," news release, Dec. 18, 2008; "G-20 Summit Coming to Pittsburgh in September," *Pittsburgh Business Times*, May 28, 2009.
2. Toker is also the author of a critically acclaimed and controversial study of the relationship between Kaufmann and Frank Lloyd Wright, *Fallingwater Rising: Frank Lloyd Wright, E. J. Kaufmann, and America's Most Extraordinary House*, published by Knopf in 2003.
3. Roy Lubove, *Twentieth-Century Pittsburgh*, vol. 2, *The Post Steel Era* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1996). Lubove's two-volume history of Pittsburgh adopts a quasi-regional approach, though even it remains theoretically underdeveloped when compared to more recent scholarship such as Robert Self's *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003) or Richard Walker's *The Country in the City: The Greening of the San Francisco Bay Area* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008).