Ms. Miles has accompanied her narrative with a liberal selection of photographs of Phillips and her circle of friends, with newspaper articles and reviews of exhibitions in which Phillips' work was displayed, and with numerous color plates of the artist's paintings. But what most establishes the "flavor" of the era, and a steadily developing insight into the manner in which Phillips and her friends viewed the circumstances of their lives, is the extensive correspondence between them which Miles has painstakingly located and included throughout the book.

Among Esther's friends by the early 1930s were Gladys Schmitt, who would achieve a national reputation for her novels, and Merle Hoyleman, whose poetry and prose had begun to appear in literary journals and would continue to do so over the next four decades. "Ellie," the primary character in Schmitt's first novel, The Gates of Aulis, was loosely modeled on Esther Phillips. But her friendship with Hoyleman and, later, with artist Eugenia "Jerry" Hughes in New York City, would be those which aided her through the most difficult times: Hoyleman, by acting as agent in selling Phillips' paintings in Pittsburgh, and Hughes by providing at various intervals companionship, food, and shelter in New York.

Miles writes with particular dexterity of Phillips' disillusionment with her life in Pittsburgh, of her wanting to go "where the real art was"; of her arrival in New York at age 34; of the years of low-paying jobs and unsuitable living conditions; of her acquaintances in the Village art scene; and of her nearly seven-year sojourn in mental institutions where she abandoned and then returned to her painting. The vignettes of Phillips as a street vendor selling her ceramics, or in Automats purchasing cheese sandwiches and pot pies from machines, "eating ketchup on crackers" and "using teabags over and over again" are powerfully rendered.

The final chapter of This Fantastic Struggle constitutes a kind of plea for greater understanding of the creative personality. Without knowing the author's own biography, one surmises nonetheless that from this point, Phillips' life serves to represent not only the plight of many unrecognized female artists, but that of the author herself. Yet Phillips ultimately accepted the consequences of her choices. While artists may seek the limelight, they survive and endure because of a passion for what they do; they paint because they are able to; because of the gratification it brings them; because they discover in the making of art the most valuable way of spending their time. Miles quotes Phillips saying, near the end of her life, to her sister Dorothy:

*I consider myself very lucky. I did exactly what I wanted to do in my life and I was happy doing it.... I lived the best life. When I got up in the morning I looked forward to the day. I was happy I could paint.*

It is the story of Esther Phillips — and not its corollary — that will cause readers to value this book and to seek out her paintings.

Gerald Costanzo, Professor of English and Director of Carnegie Mellon University Press. His most recent collection of poems is Great Disguise.

Author Lisa Miles will speak about Esther Phillips at the History Center on Saturday, December 7. Visit www.pghhistory.org for more information.

Steel and Steelworkers: Race and Class Struggle in Twentieth-Century Pittsburgh


Index. xvii + 348pp., $25.95 paper

This book combines John Hinshaw's dual roles as an activist and an academic. In both capacities, he has a deep interest in the issue of labor solidarity and fragmentation. As an activist, he views labor solidarity as a crucial precondition for a successful struggle to achieve a good society. As a historian, he realizes that the solidarity and fragmentation issue is a key element in understanding the histories of the working class and the labor movement. To illuminate this topic, he used the Pittsburgh steel industry in the 20th century as his case study. Although Hinshaw realized that ethnicity and gender factors produced schisms, he focused on race as the fundamental dividing line. While not ignoring the common interests of Pittsburgh steelworkers in higher wages, fringe benefits, and job security, he also highlighted their divergent interests. His major example was the seniority system which benefited white workers
while it restricted most black workers to the lowest rungs on the job ladder.

Although racial antagonism injured all workers by undermining their strength in struggles against employers, black workers suffered particular harm. The forms of the racial divide changed over time, but it persisted throughout the 20th century. The early part of the century witnessed the first major influx of blacks into Pittsburgh and its steel industry. Steel companies needed new workers to replace immigrants and military personnel. Therefore, black men were hired during World War I and were used as strikebreakers in the 1919 steel strike. Their presence played a crucial role in the defeat of the strikers.

The labor movement was dormant in the steel industry during the 1920s, but by the 1930s, the adverse effects of the Depression on steelworkers ignited strikes and stimulated organizing campaigns. Worker militancy, the Wagner Act, and the CIO set the stage, with the help of the federal government, for the unionization of all the major steel companies by 1941. Unlike the Amalgamated during the World War I era, the Steelworkers Organizing Committee (SWOC) reached out to black workers as well as to ethnic workers. Many African Americans responded to these union initiatives and they became strikers and union members rather than strikebreakers.

Hinshaw contends that World War II increased the role of the federal government in the economy and led to gains for both the United Steelworkers of America (USWA) and the steelworkers. Mobilization opened opportunities for black men in the steel industry as pressure from A. Philip Randolph’s March on Washington Movement and Roosevelt’s desire for continuous production led to the passage of Executive Order 8802, bringing more black men into the steel mills. These positions produced earnings greater than those of other black workers, but they were below the wages of white men. The strike wave of 1946 produced some public support for the steel strikers, limited wage gains, and a recognition that labor unions were permanent institutions, but the late 1940s increased the problems of steelworkers and their union. The combination of the USWA’s conservative culture and the pressure of the Cold War and the domestic search for subversives led to the expulsion of communists from union posts. This purge deprived black steelworkers of a cadre of white activists who had championed the cause of racial equality.

Hinshaw argues that in spite of the opposition of the steel companies, of the national leadership of the USWA, and of most white steelworkers, rank and file black activists agitated for racial equality at the workplace, the union hall, and the ballot box. They pushed for wage equalization, for a larger role in the union, and for fundamental changes in the seniority system. However, their efforts produced few positive results; even the Consent Decree of 1974 aided white women rather than black men. The racial hierarchy remained in place and white progressives such as Edward Sadlowski, in his unsuccessful campaign for the presidency of the USWA, focused on democratization of the union and opposition to deindustrialization rather than racism in the steel industry. In the late 1970s and early ’80s, many discontented Mon Valley steelworkers who faced the devastating effects of deindustrialization sought aid from local unions and recently established community groups. These organizations performed valuable services for the unemployed and their families but failed to halt plant closings and the ensuing mass unemployment, and neglected the race issue in the workplace, the union, and the community.

Based on the use of a wide variety of sources including oral histories, newspapers, and business, government and labor documents, this well-researched, valuable book has the potential to appeal to a dual audience. The general public, especially in the Pittsburgh area, will appreciate Hinshaw’s overview and his case study, while academic specialists will turn to the book for the case study and the historiographical note. In general, the second part of the book has greater value as it embodies the core of Hinshaw’s research and analysis. The earlier section, focused on 1900 – 1940, draws mainly on the scholarship of other historians which Hinshaw has synthesized quite competently. Race played a much more important role between 1940 – 1990 than in the previous era when ethnic divisions were the principal element fragmenting the labor force. Readers interested in the role of the ethnic factor can turn, with profit, to Thomas Bell’s Out of This Furnace and David Brody’s Labor in Crisis: The Steel Strike of 1919. However, those seeking a detailed description and incisive analysis of the interaction of race and the class struggle, especially in the 1940 – 1990 era, should read Steel and Steelworkers: Race and Class Struggle in Twentieth-Century Pittsburgh by John Hinshaw.

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