

‘Broadway’ Review: The Asphalt Spine of New York City

Part lively social history, part architectural survey, here is the story of Broadway—from 17th-century cow path to Great White Way. Geoff Wisner reviews “Broadway” by Fran Leadon.

By Geoff Wisner

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How many ways are there to write a history of New York City? If you’re Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace, you try to tell the whole story in books like “Gotham” and “Greater Gotham.” That’s more than 2,500 pages and 10 pounds of book, with everything after 1919 still to be covered. Mere mortals tend to focus on particular places, times or subcultures, resulting in histories like “When Harlem Was in Vogue,” “The Island at the Center of the World” and many more.

The Brooklyn-based architect Fran Leadon has chosen to tell the story by way of Broadway, the 13-mile spine of Manhattan that begins with a salty breeze and a view of Lady Liberty and ends in the orphaned neighborhood of Marble Hill, physically joined to the Bronx when the Harlem Ship Canal was built in 1895 but politically still part of Manhattan.

Like many books billed as histories of New York City, this one is really about Manhattan—but even without taking on the other boroughs, Mr. Leadon has set himself a daunting task. Broadway grew gradually northward from Battery Park, and Mr. Leadon reasonably follows that course one mile at a time. But because this is the story of Broadway, not the story of how Broadway was built, the chronology shuttles forward and backward as it goes. Like Billy Pilgrim in “Slaughterhouse-Five,” the reader must accept being unstuck in time.

In “A Note on Structure,” Mr. Leadon begins by quoting William H. Rideing, a prolific but forgotten contributor to Harper’s magazine. In 1877, Rideing wrote that “if, in a sort of geographical vivisection, a scalpel should be drawn down the middle of New York, it would fall into the channel formed by Broadway.” Reading

“Broadway” may give you the sensation I felt at the notorious “Bodies” exhibition, seeing the human form preserved and sliced lengthwise into inch-thick sections: a fresh, strange but mystifying view of the whole. Odd events and colorful characters are seen as Broadway intersects their course, but we don’t usually get the whole story.



Lithograph of Broadway, circa 1885.

PHOTO: GRANGER

garbage, and good old American dirt remained intractable problems. Broadway wasn’t yet paved, and since drainage was a poorly understood art, the roadbed quickly became a foul stew of mud and horse manure.” In 1842, Charles Dickens’s carriage was followed by two “portly sows” and a “select party of half-a-dozen gentlemen-hogs.”

Engravings and daguerreotypes almost inevitably create the impression that 19th-century Manhattan was a black-and-white world. Mr. Leadon directs us to the work of Robert Henri, John Sloan, Everett Shinn, William Glackens and other artists, who literally paint a very different picture. Broadway was colorful in the 1890s, he writes: “Broadway’s cable cars were painted bright yellow; office buildings of crimson brick and terra-cotta often had bright green roofs of verdigris copper and American flags flying from masts at the top. And everywhere

Mr. Leadon, whose previous book was a guide to New York City architecture, pays special attention to Broadway’s buildings. The Flatiron gets its own chapter, as does Alexander Hamilton’s Grange, finished in 1802 and moved twice in later years, “each time leaving its basement behind, like a hermit crab trading in its old shell.” So does the Ansonia Hotel, finished in 1904 and surviving still, which Mr. Leadon thinks “might just be the most wonderful building on all of Broadway, a seventeen-story architectural cliff of nooks and crannies, quoins, brackets, scrolls, consoles, and laughing stone satyrs.”

Mr. Leadon also has a keen sense of what life was like at street level. In the 1790s “Broadway was full of life, but wasn’t especially beautiful. Foraging hogs,

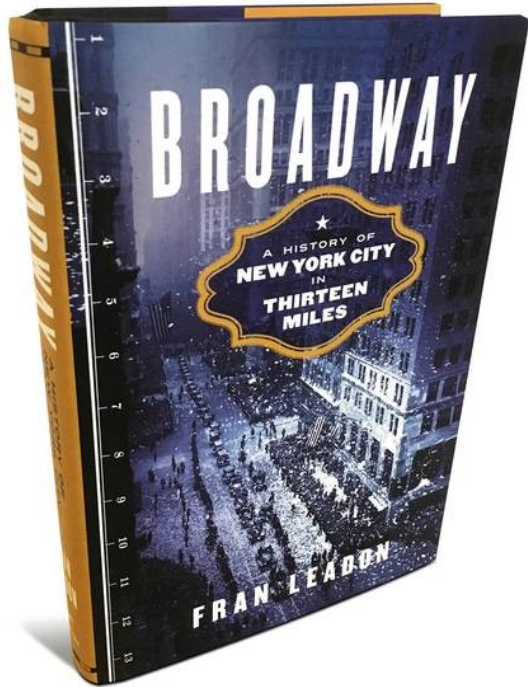


PHOTO: WSJ

BROADWAY

By Fran Leadon

Norton, 512 pages, \$35

were brightly painted billboards—not electric, yet—announcing the latest shows and the best deals.”

Mr. Leadon has a gift for capsule biography, especially of the larger-than-life types who gravitate to Broadway: from Babe Ruth playing the saxophone in his room at the Ansonia to natural-gas magnate C.K.G. Billings hosting a lavish dinner in a banquet hall—on horseback. George Templeton Strong, known to most people who know him at all through the patrician voice of George Plimpton in the Ken Burns documentary “The Civil War” and Ric Burns’s “New York: A Documentary Film,” is quoted often and accurately credited as the author of “the most extraordinary diary in the city’s history.” We see Strong rushing to the scene of the many fires in the city, measuring his walks in cigars smoked, and devouring “concoctions of frozen lemonade and rum” at a “pleasure garden” on Broadway. The spelling and punctuation of the quotations, and the references to

Strong’s drawings of “medieval castles and futuristic flying contraptions,” reveal that Mr. Leadon did not rely on the 1952 edition of Strong’s diary (four volumes long but only a fraction of the whole) but went direct to the source.

Inevitably, much is left out of this book. A landmark at the foot of Broadway, the Alexander Hamilton U.S. Custom House (now the home of the National Museum of the American Indian) goes unmentioned. So does Arturo Di Modica’s iconic Wall Street bull. And because Broadway runs one long block west of Amsterdam Avenue, the western boundary of Harlem, this history simply bypasses the Harlem Renaissance and the Harlem jazz scene.

As good as this book is, I find I can’t agree with the claim the author ends with,

made by Stephen Jenkins, author of the 1911 history “The Greatest Street in the World”: that Broadway is the place where New Yorkers feel most at home. Broadway, fascinating as it can be, is the public face of New York City, commercial, gaudy, violent and touristy by turns. The real life of the city is in its neighborhoods, and Broadway—whatever else it is—is no neighborhood.

Mr. Wisner is the author of “A Basket of Leaves: 99 Books That Capture the Spirit of Africa” and the editor of “African Lives,” “Thoreau’s Wildflowers” and “Thoreau’s Animals.”

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