

Obituaries

Edwin Burrows, Pulitzer Prize-winning historian of New York City, dies at 74

By [Harrison Smith](#) May 7

Edwin G. Burrows, a historian who co-wrote the Pulitzer Prize-winning book “Gotham,” a sweeping and stylish chronicle of New York City from the Ice Age to the Gilded Age, died May 4 at his home in Huntington, N.Y. He was 74.

The cause was complications of a parkinsonian syndrome, said his daughter, Kate Burrows.

Comprehensive histories of New York have been published as early as 1757, when jurist William Smith Jr. completed his colonial-era “History of the Province of New-York,” and 1809, when writer Washington Irving penned a satirical account of the city he dubbed Gotham — old Anglo-Saxon for “Goats’ Town.”

But few recent histories existed in 1999, when Dr. Burrows and his writing partner, historian [Mike Wallace](#), published “Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898.”

Weighing nearly five pounds and spanning 1,424 pages, the book marshaled scholarship from social, intellectual, military, political and economic history to cover the years from the Native American settlement of Manna-hata (“hilly island”) to the consolidation of the five boroughs as the city of Greater New York.

“I know this sounds crazy, but there are probably 15,000 or maybe 20,000 books on New York City. Not a single one does what they did,” [Kenneth T. Jackson](#), a Columbia University history professor and editor of the “Encyclopedia of New York City,” said in a phone interview. “The book is a towering achievement. It really is almost the only scholarly interpretive history of New York that’s based on a full knowledge of all the secondary literature.”

The book, as poet Walt Whitman might have said, contained multitudes. Its cast of characters included millionaire John Jacob Astor, social reformer Joanna Bethune, novelist Herman Melville and Tammany Hall’s Boss Tweed, who together helped explain how New York became, in Whitman’s words, “the great place of the Western Continent, the heart, the brain, the focus, the main spring, the pinnacle, the extremity, the no more beyond of the new world.”

Beyond individual historical figures, “Gotham” also aimed to capture the emerging histories of race, class and gender in America.

“In the past we inherited, there wasn’t much about black people, or immigrants, or the working class. It was all about statesmen and politicians and so forth,” Wallace said on Monday. “We wrote the history to include the people who had been left out. In doing so, we changed the whole nature of the way you presented the story. You don’t just add in some new characters, you add things that explain racism, the history of domesticity, of sexuality.”

Dr. Burrows and Wallace met around 1970, in a graduate seminar at Columbia University, and together helped establish the *Radical History Review*, an academic journal that aimed to foster new, more inclusive approaches to history.

“With some megalomania,” Wallace recalled, they set out to present their methods to a general audience, by using new scholarship to write a comprehensive history of the United States.

They made it partway through the 17th century, he said, when “it became clear that we would need multiple lifetimes, and we only had the two between us.”

Refocusing their project on the history of a single city, New York, they divided the workload. Dr. Burrows, a Brooklyn College history professor with a background in early American studies, covered the 17th and 18th centuries. Wallace, a history professor at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice in Manhattan, covered the 19th and 20th centuries.

It took 20 years to produce “Gotham,” which fell more than a century short of covering the city’s full history. (In 2017, Wallace continued the series solo with “Greater Gotham,” which devoted 1,196 pages to the 21 years between the first volume and the close of World War I. A third volume is projected to cover the years between the two world wars.)

“There came that moment in October when I opened a box and there was the book,” Dr. Burrows told *Newsday* in 1999, soon after “Gotham” was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for history. “I was very excited — elated. There was this book. But it’s like giving birth, I would imagine. You labor and you labor and then it has a life of its own and in some ways it’s no longer entirely yours anymore.”

Dr. Burrows’s research for “Gotham” led to two smaller-scale projects, including “The Finest Building in America: The New York Crystal Palace, 1853-1858,” which he published in February. The book chronicled a glass structure at Reservoir Square, now Bryant Park, modeled after a similarly elaborate Crystal Palace in London. Both buildings were destroyed by fires.

He also wrote “Forgotten Patriots” (2008), which Jackson described as the first major history of American prisoners of war during the Revolutionary War.

Most of the prisoners, Dr. Burrows wrote, were kept in British-occupied New York, mainly in squalid prison ships where they died of starvation or disease.

“As many as 35,800 patriots died in the Revolutionary War of all causes; roughly *half* of these deaths were in the prisons and prison ships of New York City,” he wrote. “However we measure it, more Americans gave their lives for independence there than anywhere else in the country.”

Edwin Gwynne Burrows was born in Detroit on May 15, 1943. His father, [Edwin Gladding Burrows](#), was a poet and radio producer who led an arts and culture interview program at a radio station in Ann Arbor, Mich. His mother, the former Gwenyth Lemon, was a social worker.

Ted, as he was known, planned to study physics before realizing he had a better aptitude for the humanities. He graduated from the University of Michigan in 1964, and developed an interest in New York history while at Columbia, where he received a master’s degree in 1966 and a doctorate in 1974.

Dr. Burrows joined Brooklyn College in 1972 and retired from teaching in 2013.

He married M. Patricia Adamski, a senior vice president and law professor at Hofstra University, in 1978. In addition to his wife, of Huntington, survivors include two children, Matthew Burrows of Manhattan and Kate Burrows of New Haven, Conn.; and two brothers.

Dr. Burrows served on the boards of the New-York Historical Society, the Society of American Historians and the Dyckman Farmhouse Museum, which preserves an 18th-century Dutch colonial-style farmhouse in northern Manhattan. He was also president of the New York Academy of History.

In the interview with Newsday, he recalled that the manuscript he and Wallace produced for “Gotham” stretched more than 1 million words before being trimmed by their editor at Oxford University Press.

“It’s the occupational disease, I suppose, of professor,” he said. “You look for books to assign and then when you can’t find one, you think, gee, maybe I ought to write one. . . . But this is much too big a book to assign, so the irony is that I failed to achieve that goal of writing a book that I could in good conscience assign to undergraduates.”

Correction: *Because of a wire service error, the photo of Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace was incorrectly captioned. Dr. Burrows is on the right, not the left. The caption has been revised.*

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 **6 Comments**

Harrison Smith is a reporter on The Washington Post's obituaries desk. Since joining the obituaries section in 2015, he has profiled big-game hunters, fallen dictators and Olympic champions. He sometimes covers the living as well, and previously co-founded the South Side Weekly, a community newspaper in Chicago.

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