

Death and Dying in the Working Class, 1865-1920

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Death and Dying in the Working Class, 1865–1920, by Michael K. Rosenow. The Working Class in American History Series. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2015. xii, 223 pp. Map, tables, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$95.00 hardcover, \$30.00 paperback.

Reviewer Thomas F. Jorsch is assistant professor of history at Bethany College, Lindsborg, Kansas. His research and writing have focused on American socialists during the Progressive Era.

Through examination of rituals and practices about death and dying in Chicago, southern Illinois coal country, and western Pennsylvania steel towns, Michael Rosenow argues that between the Civil War and World War I working-class Americans sought to maintain basic human dignity in death as an industrializing economy increasingly turned them into disposable commodities. Rosenow explores the culture of death not only surrounding large-scale events like Haymarket, Diamond, and Homestead but also localized incidents such as dying from an accident in an Illinois coal vein or miscommunication in a Pittsburgh steel mill. In facing death, workers sought to restore their humanity and give meaning to their lives but also revealed the ethnic, racial, gender, and especially class tensions of the time.

Rosenow begins by establishing an “industrial accident crisis” in the United States, where workers were injured and died at rates far exceeding those of other industrialized nations. Workers’ bodies became contested territory among those defending the new industrial order, seeking to reform it, and living it. Corporate leaders saw workers as expendable while reformers tried to impose protective legislation. Workers viewed both groups as controlling them when what they desired most was the independence they had lost over the decades. Even in death workers faced class marginalization as grisly incidents claimed workers’ lives, funerals were expensive, and cemeteries were segregated by class. Despite these obstacles, workers sought to retain their humanity by claiming agency surrounding death.

Rosenow is at his best when analyzing how workers defined death on their own terms in a working world where they held little control. In the Illinois coalfields—a chapter Iowa readers will find interesting for its connection to working-class life in Iowa as treated by Dorothy Schwieder—employers defined death as the fault of individual miners and part of the risk of work. Miners, alternatively, staged elaborate rituals to mourn the dead, ease the sorrow of the living, instigate reform, and preserve “the good death.” Much like the Civil War soldiers studied by Drew Gilpin Faust in *This Republic of Suffering* (2008), the working class often lived truncated lives and died in horrendous ways, thus not allowing for a typical “good death” scenario. Illinois coal

miners banded together through fledgling unions to provide death benefits in a communal effort to maintain human dignity in death, paving the way for the creation of the United Mine Workers of America, one of the most powerful unions in the nation. In western Pennsylvania, steel workers provided mutual aid through churches and fraternal organizations, although these were often segregated by ethnicity after steel unions were crushed in the wake of Homestead.

Much of the book features a labor-versus-capital narrative that oversimplifies the fluid nature of class, casting doubt on the explanatory power of its case studies. Whether at Homestead or Haymarket or in southern Illinois, Rosenow draws fairly strict battle lines between capitalist owners and exploited workers. One wonders, however, how much the rituals of death hold up when class lines break down. In Iowa coal country, for example, class lines could be obvious when miners lived in coal camps while managers and owners lived elsewhere. The lines were not so obvious in places like Boone and Madrid, where miners often lived in the same town as managers, attended the same churches, played on the same baseball teams, and joined the same lodges. Both groups mingled with farmers and the town's middle class. Catastrophes in the mines affected the whole community, sometimes leading to cross-class reform movements. When miners died, they were buried in the same cemeteries as teachers, artisans, and politicians, often irrespective of ethnicity, unlike the examples of Chicago and Union Miners Cemetery in Illinois. This is not to question the validity of the author's case studies but to wonder how much of a "barometer" (98) they are for the larger working-class experience with death, especially in the Midwest.

The author offers a tantalizing and well-researched glimpse into the rituals of death for workers whose lives held little value outside their own communities in industrializing America. How suggestive they are for the broader working-class experience remains to be seen.

St. Louis and Empire: 250 Years of Imperial Quest and Urban Crisis, by Henry W. Berger. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2015. xi, 353 pp. Maps, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$39.50 hardcover.

Reviewer Thomas J. Gubbels is associate professor of history at Lincoln University. His research and writing focus on Missouri history and the history of transportation.

Students of American foreign policy often ignore the Midwest, assuming that the region has played no role in establishing the nation's international goals. Henry Berger's *St. Louis and Empire*, however, places