

Book Reviews

The Cumulative Power of Lewis Hine's Photographs of Child Labor in New England

Reviewed by Jamie Franklin

Lewis W. Hine created some of the most powerful, moving images in the history of still photography. Take, for example, his photograph of Addie Card, an “anaemic little spinner,” standing in front of a spinning frame that threatens to engulf her in the North Pownal Cotton Mill. The image of Addie, taken during the summer of 1910, as Hine toured some of Vermont’s bustling factories and city centers, has become iconic. Hine’s image of Addie was prominently featured on a thirty-two-cent stamp issued by the United State Postal Service in 1998, and more recently it was used to great effect on the cover of Robert Macieski’s book *Picturing Class: Lewis W. Hine Photographs Child Labor in New England*, published by the University of Massachusetts Press in November of 2015.

Hine brought an artist’s eye to his work as a photographer, though he had no formal artistic training, having taken up a camera in 1903 in conjunction with his work for the Ethical Culture School in New York City. He was acutely aware of the power of images to evoke powerful emotional responses in a viewer. The photograph of Addie Card was part of a decade-long project, 1908-1918, in which Hine took more than 5,000 photographs of child workers for the National Child Labor Committee. Hine’s best photographic compositions, such as his image of Addie, are extremely effective in getting viewers to face the ills of child labor head-on. Hine literally brings us face-to-face with Addie; the girl’s direct gaze can’t



Addie Card, “Anaemic little spinner in North Pownal cotton mill. Girls in mill say she is ten years. She admitted to me she was twelve, that she started during school vacation and now would ‘stay.’” Summer 1910. Library of Congress

be avoided by the viewer. Her seemingly frail 12-year-old body, covered by a soiled, loose-fitting smock and standing on bare feet, is dwarfed by the unfeeling machine behind her.

Despite the singular power of this image, and many of Hine's other child labor photographs, Macieski, associate professor of history at the University of New Hampshire in Manchester, skillfully argues in his engaging, informative tome, that it is not in the individual images he created in which Hine's greatest power as a social reformer lie. Rather, it is in their cumulative effect, when viewed en masse, that they achieve their greatest efficacy. It isn't that Macieski doesn't engage in close readings of individual images, a common flaw when academically trained historians engage with visual culture. He does and does so very well. Rather Macieski makes it clear that when experienced cumulatively, we see in the larger archive of child-labor photographs by Hine not just the individual children staring back at us -- who certainly evoke a powerful empathy -- but we come to understand their sheer numbers and, more significantly, the larger context of the children's lives. As we absorb image after image we begin to see and better understand issues of social class and ethnicity, America's burgeoning capitalist economy, and competing views of children and the New England in which they live and work. As Macieski rightly points out, "Hine introduced modernity into depictions of New England, instilling them with fragments of industrial capitalism," in strong contrast to the



"Row of mill houses belonging to Holden-Leonard Co., woolen mill, Bennington, Vt. Rents are from \$6 to \$8 a month." May 1908.

Bennington Museum collection



“Carl Brown, eleven years old. He and his father run a farm of 160 acres, in Southern Vermont. He is overgrown, sluggish, but he said ‘I’d ruther go to school.’” August 1915.
Library of Congress



“Work that educates: A twelve-year-old boy tends bees under the direction of his father, John Spargo. Bennington, Vermont.” August 1914.
Library of Congress

largely idyllic images that are most closely associated with the region, even to this day.

In summarizing the strength of Hine’s photographic archive, Macieski writes, “Our modern imaginings of child labor in the early part of the twentieth century are almost inseparable from the visual palette of child labor drawn from Hine’s photographs.”

Macieski’s book has particular interest in the context of the *Wallomsack Review* because Hine had strong ties to Bennington and, indirectly, the Bennington Museum. He took some 27 photographs in Bennington County between 1909 and 1915 (17 in Bennington, 8 in North Pownal, and 2 more in “southern Vermont”). The numbers increase if you add nearby locales such as Adams and North Adams, Massachusetts (34) and Rutland and Proctor, Vermont. Yet these numbers are only a small fraction of the total number of photographs he created across the country in his work for the National Child Labor Committee, which are now housed in the Library of Congress in Washington D.C.

More significant in regard to Hine’s local ties, aside from the few dozen images he created in our immediate region, is the role that John Spargo played in Hine’s project to document the ills of child labor. Prior to his years as founding director of the Bennington Museum, Spargo was a leading

Socialist muckraker and his seminal tome *The Bitter Cry of the Children*, published in 1906, was one of the most widely read and influential documents in a growing effort to remedy the horrors of child labor in America. Hine was certainly familiar with the book and likely attended Spargo's lectures on "The Spiritual Significance of Modern Socialism" at Cooper Union in New York in the winter of 1907-8. Spargo's approach to remedying the ills of child labor and the larger iniquities of the market economy was largely Romantic, as was that of many other social reformers of the period. As he stated in his lectures at the Cooper Union, "To free the wage-worker from economic exploitation is indeed the primary object, the immediate aim, of Socialism, but it is not the sole object. It is not the end, but the means to an end that is higher, the liberation of the soul." (These lectures were compiled into a book and published later in 1908.) Hine was on the precipice of his own journey as a prominent advocate railing for the same causes, in a highly reasoned and strategic manner, and undoubtedly saw Spargo as a mentor. It was their shared interest in the betterment of social conditions in America that brought Spargo and Hine together as friends and likely what led to Hine's time spent in Pownal and Bennington, where Spargo had moved in 1909.

As a result of this connection the Bennington Museum has had a continuing relation with Hine's photographs that lasts to this day. In 2002 we hosted an exhibition, "Before Their Time: The Child Labor Photographs of Lewis Hine," featuring 56 photographs from Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine, which Macieski helped organize for New Hampshire Historical Society. It was at that exhibit when author Elizabeth Winthrop first encountered the haunting image of Addie Card, then known incorrectly as Addie "Laird." Winthrop would go on to write a critically acclaimed book, *Counting on Grace*, inspired by the photograph, and then enlisted the services of historical researcher Joe Manning, from nearby North Adams, Massachusetts, to help her track down Addie's true identity. Manning and Winthrop were able to do far more than determine Addie's real last name, Card; they eventually pulled together a fairly extensive outline of her life. This is when I entered the story, working with Winthrop and Manning to put together a small installation at the museum documenting their research into Addie's life. While I worked on that project I acquired an original print of one of Hine's local photographs, depicting company housing for workers at the Holden-Leonard Mill on today's Benmont Avenue, which I'll discuss in more detail shortly. Manning's success in his research of Addie's life led to further research, and he has gone on to document the lives of dozens of the children in Hine's photographs all across America.

A dichotomy and resulting tension between art and documentation has been integral to a full understanding of the medium since photography was first introduced to the public in 1839. Hine's photographs of child

laborers are both hauntingly beautiful artistic creations and incredibly rich historical documents. One of the strengths of Macieski's book is that he doesn't ignore the former in his understandable inclinations towards the latter. He carefully deconstructs the social and historical contexts behind Hine's photographs in a way that doesn't detract from but rather adds to our aesthetic appreciation of them. Macieski makes clear that the way Hine's photographs look is deeply indebted to the context(s) in which they were made.

While Hine may also have wanted to "liberate the soul," as Spargo put it, he understood that in order to do so he needed to attack the problem as analytically as possible and took a holistic approach to the larger project. In addition to his carefully constructed images of children workers in the midst of deplorable factory conditions -- which pull on people's heartstrings -- Hine also documented the larger world in which they lived and he created, as a foil, images of children engaged in positive, educational work. Several Hine photographs from the Bennington area perfectly illustrate these points. His image of worker housing on current-day Benmont Avenue in Bennington conveys the mind-numbing monotony of their lives by the endless row of identical houses that recede into the background. Illustrating the latter point is a series of photos by Hine intended to model "work that educates," which depict Spargo and his 12-year-old son engaged in activities ranging from weeding and feeding chickens to bee-keeping. Macieski precedes his discussion of these images of Spargo and his son with an analysis of Hine's photographs of rural "home work," or children working on the family farm, including an image of 11-year-old Carl Brown helping his father hay on their 160-acre farm in southern Vermont. It seems industrial factory work wasn't the only ill Hines wanted to rectify, because he describes Brown as "overgrown, sluggish" and notes that boy claimed, "I'd rather go to school."

The strength of Macieski's book, at least from my curatorial, art historically trained mind, is the fact that he doesn't get caught up in an analysis of only Hine's most classically beautiful images. Rather he looks at Hine's project as a whole, analyzing many photographs that may not be artistic masterpieces, and the ways in which they were presented to the public to help draw out nuances of the larger social and historical contexts in which Hine worked. In doing so, the author provides us with a far better understanding of Hine's images of local child laborers, which allows us to appreciate them all more deeply. □

Picturing Class: Lewis W. Hine Photographs Child Labor in New England, by Robert Macieski, University of Massachusetts Press, 2015, 312 pp.