

Funnell, Charles E. *By the Beautiful Sea: The Rise and High Times of That Great American Resort, Atlantic City*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1983. xi + 199 + vii pp. Photos, notes, bibliography. index, \$7.95 (paper).

Several years ago a colleague referred to Charles Funnell's study of Atlantic City as "a little-known classic" unfortunately then out of print. Originally a dissertation out of the University of Pennsylvania, the book was first published in 1975. It has now been reissued by Rutgers University Press. Funnell was among the first to consider the history of the American resort as an area worthy of serious scholarly attention. *By the Beautiful Sea* is indeed a little-known classic, representing an important contribution to the literature on American leisure history.

In his preface, Funnell states his intent to construct "a pattern of social history" for the greatest popular American resort of the Victorian era. He does so by juxtaposing several sets of themes: "the Machine and the City versus Nature" and "Morality versus Pleasure." While the book covers the history of the resort from its birth in the minds of promoters in the 1850s into the 1970s, the central focus is on the period 1890 to 1908. During these decades of cultural reorientation, Funnell maintains that Atlantic City served its visitors by easing their adjustment to life in an increasingly urban-industrial society.

In dealing with the first of his themes, Funnell builds on the work of Leo Marx and other scholars concerned with the relationship between nature and the machine in American culture. Specifically, he uses Marx's concept of "the middle landscape"—a pastoral ideal which defined for Americans a middle ground between civilization and raw nature—to good advantage. While passing into an urbanized condition, Funnell argues, Americans had not yet acquired attitudes to cope with the city. With its beach hemmed in by its boardwalk, amusement piers, and large hotels, Atlantic City was urban in

reality. But promoters huckstered the City by the Sea using “nature rhetoric.” The resort, Funnell concludes, was no middle landscape between the city and nature; the “aura of Nature” merely cloaked the resort, legitimizing the urban experience for its visitors.

Regarding “Morality versus Pleasure,” Funnell deftly charts the difficulties promoters faced in developing a pleasure resort with a family resort image. While Atlantic City laid claim to the latter, it veered noticeably toward the former. A “middle-class crisis of conscious” was revealed as pleasure and materialism triumphed over discipline and piety at the resort. “During the Mauve Decade,” Funnell concludes, “the culture wanted to be fooled somewhat; it wanted its respectability, as it defined it, and its pleasure, as it felt it needed it, at the same time. Atlantic City was the place where both the fooling and pleasuring were to be done.” (p.92) Again, Funnell offers an interpretation based on an assumption of self-deception on a mass scale. Visitors to Atlantic City wanted the urban experience cloaked in the aura of nature and their pleasure legitimized by the aura of respectability.

Funnell’s analysis is both penetrating and provocative, although there are serious problems concerning some of his operating assumptions. Funnell admits to occasionally examining material promoting other New Jersey resorts, but asserts that “Atlantic City’s magnitude endows it with representative cultural importance lacking in smaller resorts.” (p. x) This assumption is suspect. The resort industry in the 19th and early 20th centuries was highly segmented. Promoters developed resorts reflecting a variety of cultural perspectives for widely differing clienteles. Atlantic City was big and its success did influence the development decisions of promoters at other resorts, at least along the Jersey coast. However, the physical form Atlantic City had assumed by the 1920s—an urbanized resort with high-rise structures—was not regarded as the standard in the resort industry until after the Second World War. Before then, “nature rhetoric” had not been universally reduced to the level of a mere cliché. Atlantic City was a pathbreaker during a period of cultural reorientation in an industry which had come to reflect the nation’s cultural diversity. A convincing case could easily be made for the resort’s uniqueness, a uniqueness based in part on its size.

Funnell’s work has strongly influenced my own thinking on the history of the American resort. But I have found his discussion of the pleasure versus morality and city versus nature dichotomies occasionally wanting. There are difficulties, for example, in applying his analysis to camp-meeting resorts, chautauquas, and similar respectable middle-class vacation spots. Respectability was more than merely a veneer at these places. Taken alone, no one of these type resorts was as large as Atlantic City, but in the aggregate they had as large an impact on the development of the American resort as the City by the Sea. Funnell’s work lacks the comparative perspective provided, for example, by John Kasson for Coney Island in *Amusing the Million* (1978). With a number of frames of reference, Kasson is noticeably more cautious in making generalizations about “the culture” in general than is Funnell.

Despite these problems, however, *By the Beautiful Sea* does serve the basic function of a seminal work: it raises a series of basic questions which scholars in the field should seriously consider. Written in a style which captures some of the carnival spirit of its subject, the book is also a joy to read. My colleague was right; *By the Beautiful Sea* is an unrecognized classic.

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