
BACKGROUND BOOKS

IMMIGRATION

As long as there have been people, there has been mobility. "The country now called Hellas," wrote the Greek historian Thucydides in the fifth century B.C., "had in ancient times no settled population. On the contrary, migrations were of frequent occurrence."

Yet no Greek or Roman or Mongol witnessed anything comparable to the mass movement of Europeans from the Old World to the New between the 17th and 20th centuries. In the 100 years after 1830 alone, some 60 million persons crossed the Atlantic, two-thirds of them bound for the United States.

"Once I thought to write a history of the immigrants in America," remarks Harvard historian Oscar Handlin in **The Uprooted** (Atlantic-Little, Brown, 2nd ed., 1973, cloth & paper), his classic account of the great wave of immigration to the United States. "Then I discovered that the immigrants *were* American history."

Handlin, a reigning figure in the field, has written or edited numerous works on immigration, among them **Immigration as a Factor in American History** (Prentice-Hall, 1965, out of print) and a study of **Boston's Immigrants** (Harvard, 1959, cloth & paper). Other general works: Philip Taylor's **Distant Magnet** (Harper, 1972, paper only) and Maldwyn Allen Jones's **American Immigration** (Univ. of Chicago, 1960).

"The spirit of American nativism," notes historian John Higham in **Strangers in the Land** (Greenwood, 1981, cloth; Atheneum, 1963, paper), "appeared long before the word was coined about 1840 and had its

deepest impact long after the word had largely dropped out of common parlance." Boston was the scene of anti-Catholic riots in 1823, 1826, and 1829, and in 1834, the Ursuline Convent in Charlestown was burned by local roughnecks who viewed the institution as a symbol of the new Irish competition they faced for jobs.

Yet in the case of the Irish, the nativist opposition backfired. Having arrived in America as "ready-made Democrats" with a taste for politics, the Irish were impelled by discrimination and nativist agitation "into citizenship and the ballot." So concludes George Potter in his sprightly **To the Golden Door** (Greenwood, 1974), a tale that ends with multitudes of Irish volunteers coming to the Union's defense in 1861. The Civil War, says Potter, represented an "ordeal by blood [that] sealed the Catholic Irish and the Republic indissolubly."

By the onset of World War I, German-Americans, too, had "made good" here—too good, in fact. As Richard O'Connor relates, **The German-Americans** (Little, Brown, 1968) were "serenely confident of their place in the national life"; they deluded themselves into thinking they could openly oppose U.S. involvement in the Great War without arousing nativist hysteria. The result: "A scar on German-Americanism which took almost half a century to heal."

Between 1820 and 1970, 6.8 million Germans immigrated to the United States—more than any other nationality. Yet, owing in part to the continuing depredations of the fatherland, notes La Vern J.

Ripley in his scholarly work **The German-Americans** (Twayne, 1976), Americans of German extraction de-emphasized their ethnic heritage. After the 1952 election and Dwight Eisenhower's victory, a distinct "German bloc" in the electorate largely disappeared.

The small but prosperous German-Jewish community in the United States viewed with alarm the arrival, starting in the 1880s, of two million lower-class Jews from Russia, Poland, Lithuania, Hungary, Romania, and elsewhere. As it happened, writes Irving Howe, literary critic and historian, in his best-selling **World of Our Fathers** (Harcourt, 1976, cloth; Bantam, 1981, paper), most of these east European Jews soon set up small businesses (women's garment shops, cleaning stores) and eventually escaped the slums of New York's East Side. Success, Howe contends, had its price: "American society, by its very nature, simply made it all but impossible for the culture of Yiddish to survive. . . . It allowed the Jews a life far more 'normal' than anything their most visionary programs had foreseen, and all that it asked—it did not even ask, it merely rendered easy and persuasive—was that the Jews surrender their collective self."

The Jewish migration was essentially a movement of families. By contrast, most of the four million Italians who legally entered the United States between 1891 and 1920 were men. Many of these young peasants from southern Italy, observes sociologist Joseph Lopreato in **Italian Americans** (Random, 1970, paper only), were so-called "birds of passage" who came not to settle permanently but only to earn a

modest fortune and return home.

The experiences of the Poles, the Hungarians, the Chinese, and many others who have come to the United States are in the **Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups** (Harvard, 1980), which provides detailed entries on nearly all of the newcomers, past and present. One flaw: The Harvard volume's contributors, as its editors note, tend to celebrate each ethnic group's achievements—and to slight any prejudices, fears, or hatreds except those of "the dominant society."

After studying **Assimilation in American Life** (Oxford, 1964, paper only), sociologist Milton M. Gordon concludes that most Americans (intellectuals aside) still tend to find their close friends within their own ethnic group and social class. Key works in the debate over the significance of ethnicity: Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan's **Beyond the Melting Pot** (MIT, 2nd ed., 1970, cloth & paper) and Michael Novak's **The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics** (New York: MacMillan, 1973, paper).

It may be that the celebration of ethnicity is a luxury of the American-born, not one that most immigrants care to pursue. In **On Becoming American** (Houghton, 1978), writer Ted Morgan describes how he decided during the 1970s to renounce his French title (Count), change his name (from Sanche de Gramont), and become a U.S. citizen. "The true American," he writes, "is the immigrant, for he is American by choice. His nationality was not handed to him with his birth certificate. It came as the result of a deliberate effort. . . . The true American is the one just off the boat."