

Melissa R. Klapper. *Small Strangers: The Experiences of Immigrant Children in America, 1880-1925*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Publisher, 2007. xix + 219 pp. \$27.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-56663-733-6.

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Immigrant American Childhoods

During the mass migrations of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, millions of children shared the experience of being first generation Americans, either as immigrants themselves or as the children of immigrants. *Small Strangers* is the fourth title in Ivan R. Dee's American Childhoods series, edited by James Marten. In it, Melissa R. Klapper synthesizes previous studies of immigrant children and contributes her own research into children's lived experiences drawn from primary sources. The book is organized with a life-cycle approach, following children from infancy through adolescence, with a later chronological chapter that brings the subject into the 1930s.

By discussing the broad range of ethnicities arriving during a limited period, Klapper contributes to a "more expansive immigration history," highlighting the experiences of individuals while still describing the structural similarities in the experiences of this demographic group (p. xii). Immigrant children grew up between the worlds of their parents and of American institutions, and they had increasing opportunities to make their own choices about their identity as they matured. Klapper draws parallels between the stage of adolescence and the process of acculturation, emphasizing the particular challenges faced by children during this stage.

In her introduction to the changing views of childhood and family life in the United States during this time, Klapper describes how reformers' attempts to apply these

views to the immigrant family led to a "clash of cultures" (p. 14). For example, immigrant parents of young children largely maintained their native childrearing methods and resisted reformers' attempts to alter their parenting choices. As children grew, their lives frequently included work in addition to schooling and spending time with friends and family. Klapper argues that public education, in particular, introduced children to "the twin shoals of cultural retention and cultural adaptation," the latter often winning as children desired "to learn to be American youth" (p. 180). Supplementing (and sometimes competing with) public schools were ethnic language schools, which had high enrollment from immigrant children.

During adolescence, Klapper argues, immigrant children felt the need to balance social and economic responsibilities to their families with the cultural responsibility "to realize the American dream of fulfilling their individual potential" (p. 113). While a factor throughout immigrant children's lives, gender played a particularly large role during this stage. Klapper argues that the conservatism of immigrant parents was echoed, in part, by American middle-class views of gender. Thus, by adopting the American ideals of adolescence and playing the appropriate role ascribed to their sex, first generation youths could more easily acculturate. Klapper extends her analysis past 1925 into the 1930s to study the effects on children of the immigration restrictions of 1921 and 1924, as well as that of the Great Depression. She ar-

gues that nativism shown by native-born Americans and discrimination against immigrants in the workplace led to even more rapid abandonment of traditional ways by immigrants.

Klapper's use of primary sources, including many memoirs, is particularly strong in conveying how immigrant children of different backgrounds and experiences responded to the challenges they shared. In addition to drawing on sources well known in the literature on immigration, she draws on lesser-known accounts from the children themselves. For example, Ernesto Galarza's memoir, *Barrio Boy* (1971), sheds light on his move from Mexico to California during the 1910s. In his case, teachers' sensitivity to their immigrant students during this period of Americanization helped Galarza feel that "becoming a proud American did not mean feeling ashamed of being a Mexican" (p. 78). Other California children did not find school to be a refuge, however. For example, during the 1920s, Mary Nagao reported, teachers allowed some children to orchestrate the segregation of Japanese and Mexican students within the classroom and cafeteria. With these sorts of narratives, the book succeeds in showing the experiences of immigrants from different parts of the world to all parts of the country, whereas many books of immigration history in this period focus more on southern and eastern European immigrants to the East Coast. Readers have the opportunity to understand the particular challenges of Asian and Mexican immigrants, for example, but also to see the ways in which their experiences paralleled those of European immigrants. In some isolated cases, the emphasis on diversity seems to come at the expense of understanding typical experiences. For example, some home economists might have been concerned about the low milk intake of Japanese children, but this example is not necessarily the most compelling for explaining reformers' motivations for establishing milk depots nationwide. On the whole, however, the descriptions of diverse experiences are illuminating.

This comparative approach can reinvigorate analysis of subjects that would otherwise gain little attention in studies of single ethnic groups. For example, Klapper's discussion of language schools is of particular interest, suggesting the usefulness of future comparative work on the subject. While historians often focus on religious schools, particularly those intended to serve as substitutes for public schools, many immigrant children in the public schools also attended part-time language programs in such settings as "heritage schools." Klapper emphasizes that these programs, though very successful based on attendance numbers, provoked ambiva-

lent responses from both immigrant children and their parents. Future work on the views of language school founders, parents, and children across ethnicities might lead to fruitful analysis of this intriguing situation. The rise and fall of these schools, no doubt, depended not only on local factors but also on the changing demographics of various ethnic groups. This fact suggests the need for further study, especially since Klapper gives evidence of successful language schools during the 1920s and 1930s, a time that she states was more often associated with weakening ethnic traditions.

The book's penultimate chapter, looking beyond the immigration restrictions into the 1920s and 1930s, is less successful, as it contains little reference to other work and largely neglects the immigrant children. After describing broad changes in American societal views of ethnicity and immigration, Klapper asserts, without referring to specific cases, that "immigration children, either growing up during this period or raising their own children, generally concluded that acculturation was the swiftest path toward acceptance" (p. 169). Had she continued her earlier careful attention to examples drawn from the children's own lives, Klapper might have been able to address the children's specific reaction to forces of acculturation and to other competing factors not mentioned here—such as the interwar movement for intercultural education and its emphasis on cultural gifts. Certainly, life had changed for immigrant children (and their children) by the 1930s, but this chapter relies on assertions of this fact rather than detailing what that meant for the lived experiences of Klapper's subjects.

Klapper has produced an effective and readable synthesis intended largely for nonspecialists. The book states from the start that it "makes no claim to provide a theoretical outlook" on the subject of immigrant children (p. xii). Yet, one might occasionally wish for more reference to current discussions in the field and a more thorough examination of historiography, perhaps in the note on sources.

Small Strangers is a useful introduction to the subject of immigrant children during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, particularly for nonspecialists or undergraduates. Klapper deftly balances the diversity of experiences of immigrants (of different genders, from different countries, and in different parts of the United States) with a coherent framework that also lays out the commonality of their lives. By using children's descriptions of their own lives, in particular, she engages the reader and provides an introduction to these young people, making them strangers no longer.

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