H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Robert P. Swierenga. *Faith and Family: Dutch Immigration and Settlement in the United States, 1820-1920.* New York and London: Holmes & Meier, 2000. xx + 362 pp. $45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8419-1319-6.

Reviewed by Nora Faires (Department of History, Western Michigan University)
Published on H-SHGAPE (September, 2002)

On Solid Ground

On Solid Ground

Robert P. Swierenga is the foremost American scholar of Dutch immigration to the United States. *Faith and Family: Dutch Immigration and Settlement in the United States, 1820-1920* represents the culmination of a prolific career in Dutch-American scholarship, bringing together a dozen of his essays on the subject published over the last thirty-five years. A long-time faculty member at Kent State University, in 1996 Swierenga assumed the position of senior research fellow at Hope College's A. C. Van Raalte Institute for Historical Studies in Holland, Michigan, deep in the heart of an ethnic enclave he has documented and analyzed so well.

As befits a student of the "new social history," in the preface Swierenga contextualizes himself and his work. He grew up in a Dutch neighborhood in Chicago, studied at the University of Iowa not far from the rural Dutch settlement of Pella, and took his first academic job at Calvin College, founded in Grand Rapids, Michigan, by the (Dutch) Christian Reformed church. In the mid-1960s, as interest in quantitative methods and voting behavior dovetailed with rising ethnic consciousness to produce ethnocultural political analysis, Swierenga began to "explore [his] roots" (p. xvii) through an examination of Pella's 1860 presidential election. Published in 1965, "The Ethnic Voter and the First Lincoln Election" is the earliest contribution to the current volume and, while showing its historiographical and methodological age, demonstrates several of the enduring attributes of Swierenga's scholarship on the Dutch: clarity of research design; linguistic skill; attention to the differences between rhetoric (especially the statements of ethnic leaders) and reality (particularly as experienced and expressed by the less prominent); interest in the interplay of ethnicity, religion, place, and, to a lesser degree, economy; and straightforward presentation of methodology, findings, and interpretation. Combined with the tenacity in collecting and manipulating data that characterizes subsequent studies, these qualities have conduced to produce a body of work demonstrating Swierenga's mastery of the topics he has chosen to pursue.

The collection is organized into four parts: immigration patterns; religion; work and politics; and statistics and sources. The first two constitute the core of the book which, despite its title, focuses more on faith than family. Scholars of migration will appreciate the detail provided in the four chapters on emigration, especially the subtle depiction of the "anatomy of migration" from subregions of the Netherlands. Here Swierenga incorporates expertise as both an agricultural and a religious historian to explain the varying pressures on Dutch farmers and dissenters to abandon their homesteads, with some opting to settle in the United States. Compared to other Europeans, relatively fewer Netherlanders migrated to North America in the century after 1820, resulting in a U.S. immigrant population numbering less than three hundred thousand. Swierenga's research is particularly comprehensive for the period from 1830 to 1880: in the best tradition of his training, he gathered, made machine-readable, and linked nominal data from all extant Dutch emigration lists, ship passenger lists, and U.S. census data for these years, procedures the final chapters of the book delineate. In tracing individual migrants from homeland to destination and thereby investigating the process of migration from departure to settlement, Swierenga proved an early and capable practitioner of transatlantic studies.

Employing a largely behaviorist perspective and stressing the agency of immigrants, Swierenga argues that most Netherlanders sought–and achieved–economic opportunity in journeying to the United States, but that religion played a fundamental and pervasive role in their migration, whatever their affiliation. Four chapters, each embedding its discussion in homeland controversies and conditions, explore the religious institutions established by the diverse, often contentious Protestants, who tended

to settle in colonies in the rural Midwest; by the smaller number of Catholics, who were more likely to found multiethnic parishes in urban areas; and by the still smaller number of Jewish immigrants, who often arrived in American cities following an initial migration to England. Historians of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era will find especially useful chapter 8, which examines "religious localism" by comparing the "historic fault line between dominant Protestants and minority Catholics" (p. 213) in two Great Lakes cities (Chicago and Cleveland) and in rural Indiana, and chapter 9 which sketches Jewish life in three East coast cities (New York, Philadelphia, and Boston). Swierenga concludes that for the Catholic Dutch, assimilation came within two generations; for the Jewish Dutch, absorption into American Judaism similarly came quickly; but that for many Protestant Dutch immigrants and their descendants, particularly those dissenting from the homeland's main faith, institutionalized religion became a bulwark against the encroachment of American culture as well the incursion of competing Dutch faiths.

The book is replete with tables and offers a well-organized bibliographical essay. In contrast the maps are less serviceable, with several difficult to decipher for those unacquainted with the geography of the Netherlands. Moreover, the addition of a map depicting the dense clustering of Dutch immigrants in the Midwest would have highlighted a point the author stresses repeatedly: the ethnic group's distinctive regional settlement pattern.

Those seeking exploration of a range of topics that have become central to the study of ethnicity–from gender and sexuality to the transformation of the iconography, mentalities, and expressive lives of immigrants–or expecting to hear the voices of emigrants themselves will not find them in this volume. But those interested in pursuing these and a multiplicity of other topics will find no better starting point in understanding the contours of Dutch immigration and settlement than Swierenga's work. Moreover, for many historians of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century migration, rural and urban life, region, and religion, this will be a collection of enduring value. Like so many of the Dutch immigrants he has profiled, Robert Swierenga set out to plow new soil. *Faith and Family* testifies to the bounty of the harvest he has reaped, while bequeathing solid ground on which scholars can build.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Nora Faires. Review of Swierenga, Robert P., *Faith and Family: Dutch Immigration and Settlement in the United States, 1820-1920.* H-SHGAPE, H-Net Reviews. September, 2002.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=6727

Copyright © 2002 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.