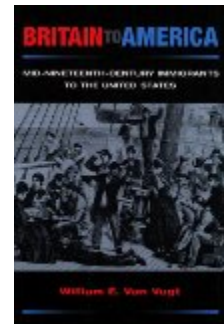


H-Net Reviews

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William E. Van Vugt. *Britain to America: Mid-Nineteenth-Century Immigrants to the United States*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999. xi + 241 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-06757-0.

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If Only We Knew

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Some years ago, Charlotte Erickson gave immigration history a striking metaphor. The English, she said, were “invisible immigrants” because they so swiftly and quietly entered the mainstream of American life, and because they were exceedingly difficult for historians to trace, due to the paucity of evidence regarding their migrations.[1] William E. Van Vugt, a historian following closely in Professor Erickson’s footsteps, has now given us another look at the elusive English men and women who came to the United States in the middle of the nineteenth century, and some of their Welsh and Scottish fellow migrants.

As one must when dealing with British immigrants, Van Vugt generated new information to fill the gaps left by official sources. He culled a ten percent sample of ships’ passenger lists for the year 1851 from five leading U.S. ports of entry. This produced information about several thousand individuals, yielding, among other things, the occupations of 2,224 adult male passengers. He also collected biographical information on 1,372 British immigrants from a total of 95 nineteenth-century county histories. Moreover, he read scores of British and American newspapers and sheafs of immigrant letters. Van Vugt mines these stores of data and anecdote in the book’s thematic essays. Each essay applies his systematic research to one of the key groups within the migrating population, including farmers, miners, women, and elites.

The result is intended to be a comprehensive survey

of British immigration to the United States during the middle of the nineteenth century. It was a time when farmers from Great Britain were among the pioneers of European settlement in the Midwest and British industrial workers, merchants, and financiers exerted powerful influence over economic development in the United States. Van Vugt discusses all of these trends intelligently, drawing apt illustration from the biographies and immigrant correspondence that he knows intimately. He has a good ear for distinctive voices and carefully sifts the representative from the remarkable, in telling his subjects’ stories. This well-written book is engaging from beginning to end.

Van Vugt has blind spots, however. Throughout the book he uses “Britain” and “the British” where he is in fact discussing England and the English. The conflation is most glaring in chapters two and three, “Emigrant Farmers” and “Britons in American Agriculture.” There are no Welsh in these chapters, and you can count the Scots on one hand. In a book purportedly concerned with the changing identities of British immigrants, it is disappointing to see so little awareness of indigenous differences and so little discussion of what distinguished English, Scottish, and Welsh immigrant communities. Scottish immigrants crop up occasionally, but the book is overwhelming concerned with English folk. Those interested in Welsh immigration will find nothing new in the chapter devoted to that group, and some errors. Welsh quarrymen, for example, were not primarily temporary migrants (p. 107). They established a number of

small but enduring ethnic communities in slate districts in Pennsylvania, Vermont, and elsewhere. Nor were the Welsh less likely than most Europeans to settle in ethnic communities (p. 98). During the antebellum period, Welsh immigrant communities were as tight-knit and geographically distinct as any rural or urban ethnic enclaves.[2]

Geography is another blind spot in this study. Van Vugt is absolutely right that determining the causes of emigration requires close examination of local circumstances. He goes farthest in this direction in his effort to prove that the counties most “distressed” by repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846 lost the most immigrants in the years 1847-1851. But his sources lend him weak support. He could have drawn on a wealth of geographical studies and maps to understand the regional variation of soil types and farming conditions in mid-century English counties, but instead relies on a report by a correspondent for the *Times*. More seriously, he bases his argument that emigration in this period was driven by distress after repeal of the Corn Laws on the scanty information provided by his sample of ships’ passenger lists. They mention the county of origin of only 114 farmers, just 22 percent of all farmers in the sample and a much smaller proportion than that of the total farming population that Van Vugt believes left Britain at mid-century. Without knowing a great deal more about where immigrants came from and where they went, I find his conclusions unconvincing.

Geographical knowledge is the crux of the problem now facing migration historians. The last fifty years of scholarship drew the general outlines of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European immigration to America. We now want to fill in those maps with much more precise information about who emigrated and why. Inquiry at this level demands more detailed research that places

migrants within a series of geographical contexts over the course of their lives. For the very reasons Van Vugt mentions, carrying out longitudinal micro-histories of English and Scottish immigrants will be devilishly difficult, but at least one study of internal migration indicates how it might be done. [3]

Readers should also be aware that *Britain to America* mainly addresses rural immigration to New York state, Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, and Wisconsin. Cornish lead miners in the Midwest get nearly as much attention as the much greater numbers of Welsh, English, and Scottish miners and engineers in Pennsylvania. Given the strong incentives these days for academic authors to title their books to appeal to as large an audience as possible, it is quixotic to wish that Van Vugt had called this book “English Immigrants in the Old Northwest.” But it would have been more truthful advertising.

Notes

[1]. Charlotte J. Erickson. *Invisible Immigrants: The Adaptation of English and Scottish Immigrants in Nineteenth-Century America*. Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1972.

[2]. Gwilym R. Roberts. *New Lives in the Valley: Slate Quarries and Quarry Villages in North Wales, New York, and Vermont, 1850-1920*. Published by the author, 1998; Anne Kelly Knowles. *Calvinists Incorporated: Welsh Immigrants on Ohio’s Industrial Frontier*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997; William D. Jones. *Wales in America: Scranton and the Welsh, 1860-1920*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1993.

[3]. Colin Pooley and Jean Turnbull. *Migration and Mobility in Britain since the 18th Century*. London: UCL Press, 1998.

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