

Book Review

Edward A. Abramson, *The Immigrant Experience in American Literature*. British Association for American Studies Pamphlets in American Studies No. 10. 1982.

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The pamphlet reviewed here, *The Immigrant Experience in American Literature*, is written by Edward A. Abramson, University of Hull. Abramson's "main research interest" is Jewish-American writing and this interest is clearly reflected in the pamphlet. The pamphlet is divided into two main sections, each covering one of "two distinctive traditions in ... immigrant writing, each of them focussing on one of the two essential destinations of the immigrant — the land or the city. It is of course no accident that the Scandinavians were primarily responsible for developing the literature about immigrant settlement on the land, especially in the West, nor that Jewish immigrant writers took for their preserve the American city with its promise of freedom and problems of assimilation and secularization. The contribution of these two literatures to American thought and culture is incalculable, and it is with them and associated works that this essay will primarily concern itself" (p. 6).

This statement raises two questions that are not dealt with in the pamphlet. The Scandinavian contribution to "literature about immigrant settlement on the land" may not be an "accident" (whatever that word should mean to a historian), but the reasons for the bulk and quality of this contribution are not so obvious to me as Abramson's "of course" suggests. In the context of the third sentence in the quotation, "incalculable" has a meaning roughly synonymous with "very great." I would suggest, however, that the Scandinavian contribution is literally incalculable in the sense that it is for the most part written in one of the Scandinavian languages and thus necessarily outside the main stream of American culture. Certainly, a few Scandinavian-American authors were translated and published by major New York Publishers (Waldemar Ager and Ole Edvart Rølvaag) and some have written in English (like the amateurish James A. Peterson, the popular Martha Ostenso or Sophus Keith Winter, who is merely mentioned as a critic of Moberg in the pamphlet) and there are many second and third generation writers (like novelist Kathryn Forbes, Borghild M. Dahl or Norman Matson, and poets Carl Sandburg, Robert Bly or Joseph Langland), but to claim that their collective contribution to American literature or "thought" is comparable to the impact of the Jewish-American writers is a questionably unbalanced view of American literary culture today.

Abramson's discussion of Scandinavian-American literature is largely

limited to a comparison between the novels of the American Rølvaag and the Swedish Vilhelm Moberg. The comparison implies, however, that they are both American, and nowhere is it suggested that the main difference in attitude between the two novels is the difference between an American and a European point of view. Without this basic insight the comparison is of little interest.

Of the large number of Scandinavian-American writers on the immigrant experience of the frontier, Abramson singles out only two for brief mention: Hans Mattson and Hjalmar Hjorth Boyesen, neither of whose experiences were representative of that aspect of immigrant life, the first being a Union colonel and a diplomat in India, the other a Professor of German at Columbia University. It is natural that Willa Cather is given some space in a discussion of the immigrant experience in American literature and there is no need to be defensive (as is Abramson) on that score. The pamphlet gives a useful 2½ page survey of three of her novels.

The second of the two main chapters of the pamphlet is called "The City and the Jewish Tradition." After a brief mention of the Irish and the Italian immigrant experiences (with James T. Farrell, Guido D'Agostino and Mario Puzo as the representative authors), Abramson turns to Jewish-American literature. In the sub-chapter on "The Earlier Jewish-American Writers" he discusses the work of immigrant writers like Mary Antin, Abraham Cahan, Ludwig Lewisohn and Henry Roth and the second generation American Herbert Gold. Considering the space available, this is a well done and useful survey and the best part of the pamphlet. When Abramson moves on to "The Jewish-American Novel since 1945," however, I question the validity of including writers like Potok, Bellow, Malamud and Philip Roth in a discussion of immigrant literature. There is also the purely practical consideration that there is so much critical writing on the Jewish tradition in American Literature that it is hardly necessary to discuss Bellow's *The Victim* or Malamud's *The Assistant* in a 40 page pamphlet on the Immigrant experience. The students who read this pamphlet will all be familiar with these writers, but will probably not know the names of Louis Adamic, Waldemar Ager or Pietro Di Donato.

Abramson seems to have had difficulties in deciding whether the pamphlet should be on how the immigrant experience is reflected in and has influenced American literature, or on the writing of immigrant Americans. The title suggests the former approach while the main text of the pamphlet is concerned with immigrant writers (Cather is a deliberate exception; Moberg a slip) on the one hand and Jewish writers, whether they are immigrants or not, on the other.

There is a discrepancy between the impact of immigration on American society and the extent to which this impact is registered in American literature. The cultural and social distance between the "native" American cultural establishment and the many and growing immigrant groups was so great that it must have been difficult for American writers to imagine the immigrant experience or even recognize it as a central American experience. That the immigrants were regarded as an exotic element is one of the points brought out in an early instance of immigrant life in American fiction, *A Hazard of New Fortunes* by William Dean Howells. One of the first

attempts by a native American novelist to see the immigrant experience from the inside is Upton Sinclair's grossly underrated *The Jungle*, while the first major American novelist who could draw upon the experience of his own family when writing about the immigrant experience was Theodore Dreiser. When I ask whether these and writers like Howard Fast, Hamlin Garland, Alex Haley, Arthur Miller, Henry Miller, Eugene O'Neill, Edwin O'Connor or William Styron should not be mentioned in a discussion of the immigrant experience in American literature, I am clearly asking for another pamphlet than that written by Edward Abramson. However, any attempt to write the other kind of account, that of the literature written by the immigrants themselves, will have to be based on greater linguistic skills than most of us possess: Yiddish, Finnish, German, Icelandic etc. Only after studies of all the many immigrant literatures are available will it be possible to write a synthesizing account of them all.

In an introductory pamphlet for students, bibliographical guidance is essential. Regrettably, the weaknesses of Abramson's "Guide to Further Reading" are so severe that it is of questionable value. An early effort to write about American immigrant writers is Henry A. Pochmann's chapter "The Mingling of Tongues" in *Literary History of the United States*, and this still unsurpassed survey should be recommended to anyone wanting an overview of this aspect of American literature.

As far as the Scandinavian side is concerned, Abramson recommends the first volume (1931) of Blegen's *Norwegian Migration to America 1825-1860*, which is largely concerned with the exodus from Norway and the first settlements, but does not mention the second volume (1940), which deals with the building of religious, cultural and social institutions in the new world. Many books and articles have been written on Rølvaag, but the only item mentioned is a four page article which throws no light on the immigrant experience. The only bibliographical reference for Boyesen is an essay from 1896. This is hardly "the fruit of recent research." In addition to Clarence Glasrud's biography of 1963, Per Seyersted's excellent study of Boyesen's growing awareness of the immigrant's dilemma in *Americana Norvegica* (1966) should be recommended to any student wanting insight in the immigrant experience. Arnold Barton's valuable edition of Swedish letters (1975) is recommended, as it should be, but Blegen's pioneering collection of Norwegian immigrant letters published in 1955 is not mentioned. Even though Abramson demonstrates interest in immigrant autobiography, Jacob A. Riis is merely listed as an *observer* of immigrant life, not as the author of *The Making of an American*.

All in all I cannot recommend Edward A. Abramson's pamphlet as an introduction to the study of the immigrant experience in American literature.

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