

*Fra America til Norge I: Norske utvandrerbrev 1838-1857*. Utgitt ved Orm Overland og Steinar Kjærheim for Kjeldeskriftfondet. Solum forlag, Oslo 1992.

Immigration from Norway to the United States is unique among the Scandinavian countries. Most importantly, it began earlier and covered a substantially larger percentage of the population than in any other Scandinavian countries. The first company of immigrants left Stavanger in 1825 and from the middle of the 1830s, several hundred Norwegians left each year. On the eve of the American Civil War, more than 6,000 Norwegians took off each year. As sources of information about prospects in the new world, immigration letters were very significant for the early period of mass immigration covered in the present volume. The present volume is the first in a series intended to cover immigrant letters into the twentieth century. It will undoubtedly provide a model for coming editions of emigrant letters in Scandinavia.

Immigrant letters may be read for a number of reasons. One common reading focuses on the cultural impact of the country of choice and seeks to analyze the process of acculturation. Other historians have tried to use immigrant letters as sources for social and economic history. In his introduction, the editor Orm Overland provides a fine sketch of the social and economic background of the letter writers as well as of the economics surrounding the posting of trans-Atlantic letters. He points out that a significant revolution in communication resulted from the international agreements of the late 1860s that changed the sending of trans-Atlantic messages from a fairly costly affair to an everyday expense, a process of some consequence for the length and perhaps for the content of the letters. While later emigrants were often informed by leaflets, by book-length journalistic travel accounts, by paid agents, and by other forms of commercial advertisement, emigrants from the early part of the nineteenth century seems to have been dependent primarily upon America-letters often written in a tone of voice that indicates that the writer was conscious that the letter was likely to be saved and possibly be passed along beyond the immediate family circle. These intentions make most of the letters printed here more informative and less personal than letters from Danish immigrants at the turn of the century.

The letters that have been collected have an high quality. They provide a beginning for an assessment of the political impact of America upon the Nordic consciousness. Most interesting in this respect are a number of letters criticizing religious authorities in Norway who warned against emigration. The political impact on the popular conception of America is present already in the first letter reproduced. Immigrants generally had few comments on the political experiment of democracy and they had little to say about the Jacksonian practice of economic liberalism. Instead, immigrants focussed on the contrast to societies where the rich and the well-born were exempt from the duty of labor. "Heri Americha [sic] har det sig saa: Enhver Mand arbeider. Jeg var hos en Prast ... han var ligesaa god til at arbeide som jeg." The image of the United States as a country where common people were entitled to equality by virtue of work discipline was soon to inspire social and political perceptions in the Scandinavian countries.