
Writing an introductory work on something so extensive as a country is a challenge, because the author easily gets caught in generalizations, or at least it will seem so to some readers. Generalizations of course are necessary, and MacQueen’s book is meant as an introduction to further and more focused studies of American society, culture and history.

MacQueen’s book falls into live chapters. The first chapter (Places) focuses on the geography of the United States, and interestingly points to the mistake we all commonly make that we tend to think New York is located on a parallel roughly halfway between London and Paris. Placing the country on the correct parallels, MacQueen briefly describes the topography, indicating the tremendous variation in the Ameican landscape, and then in more detail outlines the various regions. He deals with the regions both concerning geography, history and dialects. The second chapter (People) is for any survey study the most challenging describing and discussing the United States as a nation. As is very common, MacQueen speaks of the country as a salad bowl with various recognizable ingredients. The reasons for immigration, waves of different ethnic immigrants, and legislative limitations are hinted at, but the chapter primarily deals with the issue of minority groups. Women as a group are also discussed under this section, and treated separately, as if gender were not related to race and class. It would be welcome if the next edition of the book chose to discuss women not as a separate entity, but in relation to gender. The role of religion in American society concludes the chapter, alluding to the religious diversity which characterizes this nation of immigrants.

Government is the topic of the third, and probably most useful, chapter of the book. Concisely and with good figures for illustration, it describes the structure of government, the system of checks and balances and the electoral system. Chapter four is devoted to an outline of the education system. It offers a history of primary, secondary and higher education, as well as a presentation of the unique features of American High School life. The chapter concludes with an overview of the present circumstances of the American educational system, and the many debates about the education crisis which periodically occur. Challenges is the title of the final chapter, and it focuses on the many challenges Americans confront, still recognizing that a large majority of Americans are living a normal life, but advising us that the issues of poverty, homelessness and crime cannot be ignored.

MacQueen’s book offers many interesting pieces of information, but many of the subjects he deals with is subject to crude generalizations. Although various aspects of the Civil Rights struggle are mentioned, in discussing African-Americans’ right for equality, for example, the reader is likely to conclude that desegregation happened overnight. Though the target audience for a survey such as MacQueen’s will naturally be newcomers to the field of American Studies, students’ prior knowledge is nonetheless likely to be varied, and MacQueen’s book does not offer many challenges to the university level student. In the final chapter, the author makes a point of describing the country's
weaknesses, but an experienced reader is left with the feeling that, despite the author's good intentions of representing all aspects of contemporary America, the work is too generalized. The many web-site references are, however, valuable.

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One does not often think of Norwegian Americans as an urban group. Indeed, of the nearly three million immigrants who came to the US from the Nordic countries, the Norwegians were the least likely to settle in urban areas. In addition, much of the scholarship in Norwegian-American studies has focused on the rural experiences of the Norwegian American community, primarily in the Midwest. Undoubtedly, the magnificent novels by Ole Rølvaag about the lives of Norwegian immigrants on the North Dakota prairies have also contributed to this image.

In recent years, however, a new emphasis on the urban aspects of Norwegian-American history can be discerned. In 1984 a conference at St Olaf College examined a variety of aspects of Scandinavian-American urban life, and in 1988 a major study of the history of Norwegian-Americans in Chicago appeared. The present book by David Mauk, a study of Norwegians and the Norwegian-American community in Brooklyn, New York, between 1850 and 1910, can be seen as a continuation of this trend. The handsome and richly illustrated book is also important in two other ways. It focuses on the fast-coast experiences of Norwegian immigrants, rather than the traditional emphasis on the Midwest, and takes its starting point in a previously little studied type of migration from Scandinavia to the US, that of sailors and seamen.

Norway is a country with strong maritime traditions, and Norwegian sailors' habits to leave their ships in New York to seek other employment provided the basis for the Norwegian colony in Brooklyn. The colony began to grow in earnest in the 1870s, and by 1890 some 5,000 Norwegians lived in Brooklyn and surrounding areas, making it the sixth-largest concentration of Norwegians in the US. While first placing the colony in a larger New York context, Mauk also provides a detailed analysis of its settlement patterns, family and neighborhood structures, and social composition. By the turn of the century the settlement was changing. The maritime colony was transient in nature, with a high