

Orm Øverland, *Immigrant Minds, American Identities: Making the United States Home, 1870-1930*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000. Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Centennial Series, x + 243 pp, ISBN: 0-252-02562-8; cloth, \$34.95.

Christopher Columbus has gone through various incarnations as hero and, more recently, as villain. The 1893 Columbian Exposition was a defining national moment. By the 1930s, Columbus Day was becoming a particularly Italian day. In the 1990s Native American advocates have objected to any celebration while Hispanics have sought to reclaim him from Italians, even sponsoring an alternative parade in New York City. For Scandinavians, Columbus is a 'Johnny-come-lately,' having arrived nearly a half millennium after Leif Erikson. The modern discovery of a verifiable 'Vineland' in Newfoundland provides scientific backing to Norwegian pride, but evidence is usually peripheral to ethnic claims of ancestors' mythic roles.

Such filiopietistic uses and abuses of the past make most historians cringe. However much 'cultural diversity' has been glorified by modern academics, few want to be associated with exaggerated tales of ethnic triumphs and the booming heritage business. Orm Øverland shared those feelings until he noticed common patterns lurking beneath various groups' mythologies and chauvinisms. In these myths, Øverland detects a distinctly American form which he labels the 'homemaking myth' because its function is to claim the United States as the group's rightful home. However much the mythology recalls the imagined glory of an 'old world' country, it functions to secure the home in America. Although the myths are ethnically exclusive, their common structure makes them an American phenomenon. Øverland believes all homemaking myths chronicle three basic elements: renditions of founding, sacrifice, and ideology.

Like nations, immigrant groups have founding myths, ones that proclaim 'we were here first,' or at least very early. Erikson and Columbus provide the most obvious source, in their cases for Norwegians and Italians. Some (especially Greeks, Poles, Jews, Croatians, and Swedes) even claimed pre-Columbian contact. Others (especially Germans, Africans, and Irish) claimed a major colonial role alongside Anglos. Only German-Americans challenged the notion that America was an Anglo-American country; for the others, these myths stake a claim to a place within the dominant tradition. Ancestral connections to the Founding Fathers, preferably Washington, are a recurring story, no matter how unlikely.

Death in patriotic causes, or at least having risked paying the ultimate price, crucially cemented many groups' claim to be full Americans. In this second homemaking myth, that of sacrifice, a role in the Revolution was ideal, one in the Civil War would do. Pulaski and Kosciuzko were repeatedly invoked by Polish spokesmen. But even such obvious heroes could be contested; Kosciuzko (or Koscinko) became an icon of Lithuanian-America nationalism. Initial Polish-Lithuanian cooperation in building statues of the Revolutionary engineering genius was later trumped by the Lithuanian desire to develop a separate identity. Germans and Scandinavians emphasized their Civil War contributions when their loy-

alty was questioned during World War One. That war's Liberty Loan campaign successfully tapped into ethnic groups' practice of using their wartime contributions as the ultimate proof of their legitimate claims to an American home.

Louis Adamic's phrase – that immigrants 'were Americans before they landed' – encapsulates Øverland's third homemaking myth. By the nature of their pre-American experience, immigrants already shared American values before landing on its shores. The Irish tales of English oppression provided a ready-made tool for their assault on the ramparts of Anglo-Americans. Dutch Protestant resistance to the Spanish Empire offered a natural ideological heritage. Swedes and Finns laid claim to a common pioneer spirit, symbolized by their introduction of log cabins into the new world. Poles claimed that their long struggle for independence provided a unique commonality with Americans. As the pianist and statesman Ignacy Paderewski told a Polish-American audience, 'it is superfluous to explain to them the ideals of America' (127). Jews pointed to the Mosaic tradition as evidence that, in the words of Rabbi Emil Hirsch, 'we cannot be good Jews and not be good Americans' (127). Greeks naturally promoted their ancient tie to democracy. A few groups went further. Some Germans claimed co-founder status with the Anglos, sharing Anglo-Saxon blood and traditions of liberty. Pointing to the questionable pedigree of many early English settlers and of their propensity for slave-holding and High Church religion, some Germans dared to suggest they were better Americans. The Irish were also not above pointing out Anglo-American sins.

Øverland synthesizes his argument by carefully analyzing the Norwegian homemaking myths that emerged in the 1860s and retained currency into the 1930s. As formulated most completely by indefatigable speaker and writer Rasmus Anderson, the Norwegian homemaking myth possessed all three elements. Leif Erikson provided the ultimate founding myth. Not only could Norwegians claim to have beaten Columbus to the 'new world,' they could also claim to have supplied the best part of Anglo blood given that the Puritans emigrated from areas of England settled by Vikings. The death of Col. Hans Christian Heg and much of the 15th Wisconsin Infantry at Chickamauga supplied the sacrifice myth. And ancient Norse democracy offered ideological commonality. Taking the argument further, the Norman lords who extracted the Magna Carta from King John were arguably Norwegian, descendants of the Vikings who landed in Normandy. Thus the Anglo-Saxon love of liberty came from Norwegians!

The 1925 centennial of Norwegian immigration to America provided the apotheosis of Norwegian-American ethnic expression, complete with numerous renditions of the homemaking myths. Ole Rolvaag gave them enduring form in *Giants in the Earth*. St. Olaf's College adopted Norman Gothic architecture as its motif, echoing that Viking connection. The Norse American Centennial, in addition to numerous ceremonies, was marked by postage stamps and a congressionally endorsed medal that celebrated the Norwegian landings of 1000 and 1825. Yet by the 1930s the Norwegian homemaking myth was becoming vestigial. As Norwegians came to feel fully accepted as Americans, the need for ethnic braggadocio declined. As in Rolvaag's later novels, the burden of ethnic memories

reverses from promoting acceptance in the new country to preventing their children from forgetting there ever was a distinct culture. The purpose shifts from seeking acceptance of their differences to preserving the memory of those differences. Homemaking myths are no longer necessary.

Øverland argues that these myths are neither a rejection of their homeland, as Oscar Handlin portrays them in *The Uprooted*, nor are they truly about 'the old world.' These are about America and being American. No matter how much the 'new world' incubated new enthusiasms for 'old world' nationalisms, virtually no spokesmen argued for separatism within the United States. The main thrust of homemaking myths was securing and enhancing the group's standing in America, justifying a claim to being as good, or even better, Americans as Anglo-Americans. Homemaking myths promoted 'complementary identities,' to use Jon Gjerde's term, in which 'old world' nationalisms and 'new world' Americanism were complementary, co-existing with little tension.

Immigrant Minds, American Identities is an intriguing and lively work that makes a convincing case for taking ethnic booster literature and celebrations seriously. The book's strength lies in its examination of language and activities that trumpeted ethnic exclusivity and finding a pattern, one that helps define the American experience. Øverland acknowledges that the power of homecoming myths had limits. He portrays them as a middle class phenomenon that harmonized with the middle class uplift of the 'American Dream.' Many working class ethnics, especially active labor unionists and socialists, as well as members of the middle class seeking rapid assimilation, did not embrace them. The book neither develops this point nor offers a systematic examination of the homemaking mythology's influence. Thus, it may have been merely the product of an 'ethnic industry' whose representativeness is unclear.

The use of 'Anglo-Americans' and their culture as an all-purpose bogeyman throughout the book raises larger questions. First there is an irritating problem of language, especially to a reviewer with Scottish ancestry. After 'Anglo,' 'British,' and 'English' are all invoked in the opening pages – 'Anglo-American' emerges as the most common descriptor. The Epilogue concludes that homemaking myths were addressed 'to the culturally and socially dominant American group ..., middle-class Americans of primarily English descent' (192). Whether Welsh, Scots, Cornish, and Scotch-Irish are part of the presumed hegemonic dominant culture is unclear.

The confusing terminology suggests a more fundamental misunderstanding that conflates language and dominant culture with ethnicity. Being 'Anglo' in America has been more a matter of lifestyle, of behavioral assimilation, than of ancestry. Americans 'of primarily English descent' were not numerous enough to be so dominant. It is likely that ethnic spokesmen saw English speakers of mixed northern European ancestry and confused linguistic fluency for ethnic derivation. It was this very tendency to define Americans of European descent through lifestyle rather than ancestry that facilitated the rapid assimilation of the groups creating homemaking myths. Today, the descendants of the very ethnics

Øverland describes are also often inaccurately labeled 'Anglos' and 'WASPs.' Through his ambiguous use of terminology and his apparent acceptance of the ethnic spokesmen's understanding, Øverland misses an opportunity to explore an important aspect of American assimilation. Our natural concentration on the exclusion of the 'other' should not blind us to the other side of the story, the remarkable speed of inclusion into American society.

The homemaking myths may have addressed a mythical audience – one that ethnic spokesmen mistakenly saw as an Anglo monolith. Øverland maintains that the purpose of homemaking narratives was to convince Anglo-Americans that the new groups deserved an equal place in American life. However, as he shows, 'these arguments were hardly noticed' by Anglo-Americans (21). That reinforces the sense that ethnic spokesmen misunderstood their audience and the dominant culture. If so, there is something sad about the story, echoing Oscar Handlin's poignant depiction of the marginal second and third generations.

Øverland has written a lively account that makes intriguing use of a variety of materials, many often overlooked, such as postage stamps. It joins sixteen other volumes in the University of Illinois Press' important Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Centennial Series. *Immigrant Minds, American Identities* is a useful addition to the explorations of memory and identity that have enriched our understanding of ethnicity in America over the last two decades.

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Luc Herman (guest editor), *Approach and Avoid: Essays on 'Gravity's Rainbow.'* Papers from the International Pynchon Week, Antwerp, 1998. Special issue, *Pynchon Notes* 42-43, Spring – Fall 1998.

Poly-modal, genre-hybrid and apparently unclassifiable, Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow's* (1973; hereafter *GR*) stubborn resistance to any totalizing and simplifying reading that ends all readings continues to be its main, and perhaps only, common denominator. As such, the very lack of unifying approaches frequently provides a – perhaps somewhat fragile – framework for just about any collection of essays on this most complex masterpiece of post-modern literature. The novel itself may resist convention, but the task of sorting critical approaches according to some kind of contextual frame surely does not. In this respect, editor Luc Herman's introduction is but an echo of a number of its predecessors in stating that 'if anything connects these new essays, it is an awareness that *GR's* mass and complexity make the book impossible to read and interpret in a conventional way.' Conventional as it may be, Herman's tentative classification *in spite* is indeed required, faced as he is with the challenge of finding some framing introduction for the 18 extraordinarily diverse essays in this collection. The essays were first written for Part One