

Reviews

Olson, David W. *Vikings Across the Sea. Emigration and the Building of a Greater Norway, 1860-1945*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013

Øverland, Orm, editor and translator. *From America to Norway. Norwegian-American Immigrant Letters 1838-1914*. Volume One, 1838-1870. Northfield, Minnesota: Norwegian-American Historical Association, 2012

Scholarly research in the field of Norwegian-American history and culture has long and venerable traditions. In 1925, the Norwegian-American Historical Association (and publisher of one of the books under review) was established, and under the guidance of such prominent historians as Theodore Blegen, Kenneth Bjork, and Odd Lovoll, NAHA helped establish the study of Norwegian America as a source of inspiration and as a model for other American immigrant and ethnic groups.

Two new publications in the field of Norwegian American studies attest to both the continued vitality and trans-Atlantic nature of the field. Orm Øverland's comprehensive volume of Norwegian America letters in careful and highly readable English translation brings the reader to one on the central aspects of immigration studies: the personal accounts by individual migrants and the challenges and, as it turns out, rewards of doing careful work with these sources. The volume is the first in a projected series of three, which in turn are based on Øverland's massive seven volume series of America letters, drawn from different archives in Norway, and published between 1992-2011.

From America to Norway is an impressive piece of work. It consists of 167 letters, the first one by Svein Knudsen Lothe, dated on July 10, 1838, in Chicago, and the last one by Iver Ellingsen Elsrud from Rock Creek Iowa, dated on December 22, 1870. In addition, there is a "Reader's guide" to the letters outlining the many problems and pitfalls involved in editing and

translating vernacular writings from the mid 19th century. Øverland has also provided us with a stimulating and very useful “Introduction” to the letters.

The publication of both Norwegian and English versions of these letter collections suggests the enduring interest in the experiences by individual migrants, and Øverland follows in the footsteps of earlier editors of Norwegian immigrant letters, notably Theodore Blegen. Over the years, different conclusions as to what we can learn from these letters have been drawn, and what they really tell us about the nature of the immigrant experience has been a topic for debate. Historians in Sweden, for example, had high expectations of the Swedish immigrant letters when that academic profession took up the study of Swedish immigration in earnest in the 1960s, but were soon disappointed that many letters contained relatively little factual information, but instead were quite formulaic. Øverland, however, shows how the letters must be seen as a specific genre of writing, and by treating them as a category of texts of their own, he is able to present them to us in a different and innovative way. In this mode of reading the letters he joins with scholars such as David Gerber, Øyvind Gulliksen, and Jennifer Atterbery who also have done important work in this field in recent years.

The discussion in the introduction of the fact that the letters represent only one half of the correspondence, the development of the letter from what Øverland calls “public” to “private” texts, and the question of the role they played as pieces of propaganda for the migration to America add further to the book and help place the immigrant letters in an important context. The great bulk of the book, however, is devoted to the 167 letters, and regardless of the way in which you choose to read them, they are a testimony to the great variety of the mass migration of Norwegians to the United States. For many good reasons, migration studies often include quantitative and statistical aspects and contexts. In this case, however, Orm Øverland has done us great service by opening another window to Norwegian-American history by allowing us to hear the individual voices and stories of the migrants. These stories remind us of the fundamentally human (and thus qualitative) dimension of all migration.

Vikings Across the Atlantic is a careful and interesting study of the creation of a Norwegian-American identity and of an intricate pattern of contacts between the Norwegian-American community and Norway. The first part of the book traces how Norwegian Americans in the second half of the 19th century set out to create a sense of a separate identity in the United States, and how this Norwegianness often was rooted in factors such as

language and cultural patterns. Olson also shows how an ethnic leadership emerged and played an important role in using the sense of Norwegian-American identity as a way of claiming a place in their new homeland.

Relying on Orm Øverland's work on ethnic home-making myths, Olson points to how different historical elements from a real or imagined Norwegian-American past were put to use in the construction of the Norwegian-American identity. The centrality of the Vikings to Norwegian (and, one could add, Swedish)-American identities emerges clearly, and the discussion of the role of Rasmus B. Anderson is important.

Olson also argues that when Norwegian-American identity building culminated after the turn of the twentieth century, Norwegian Americans were not only able to claim an equal place in the American republic through the maintenance of ethnicity, but began arguing for Norwegian-American superiority. The way in which this was achieved should no doubt also be seen in the larger ethno-racial context of turn-of-the-twentieth-century America, where both Norwegian and Swedish Americans came to occupy a special and privileged position.

Vikings Across the Atlantic also very interestingly links the analysis of Norwegian-American identity construction to nation building processes in Norway in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. As Norway broke up from the union with Sweden in 1905 and emerged as an independent state for the first time in many hundred years, Olson convincingly shows how a sense of "greater Norway" was created, in which both Norwegian Americans and Norwegians in Norway joined together in similar and at times common ethnic and nation building processes. His discussion of the Norwegian and Norwegian-American experiences of World War II is also illuminating and provides an important explanation for the contemporary contours of Norwegian America. Trans-national and trans-Atlantic patterns of influence and exchange were thus established, through which the two groups of Norwegians on either side of the Atlantic resonated with each other in a close relationship. By emphasizing the connections between the old homeland and the ethnic community in America in this way, Olson has taken the study of Norwegian American identity formation an important step forward. No doubt a similar approach could successfully be applied to other ethnic groups as well.