

## Britain to America: Mid-Nineteenth-Century Immigrants to the United States

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*Britain to America: Mid-Nineteenth-Century Immigrants to the United States*, by William E. Van Vugt. Statue of Liberty–Ellis Island Centennial Series. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999. xi, 241 pp. Illustrations, graphs, tables, maps, notes, bibliography, appendixes, index. \$49.95 cloth, \$18.95 paper.

REVIEWED BY BRIAN COFFEY, STATE UNIVERSITY COLLEGE OF NEW YORK AT GENESEO

Much of the recent work on the immigration of various groups to the United States deals with culture groups that were slow to assimilate or that left a distinct imprint on the cultural landscape of a region. The British do not fit either of those categories. They quickly assimilated into mainstream society, in large part because there were no language barriers. Nor did they settle in clusters to the extent that some other culture groups did. Hence, while they did have an impact on the cultural landscape, there is no well-defined "British culture region" in the same way that one speaks of areas of Finnish or Swedish settlement in Minnesota or Dutch settlement in central and northwest Iowa. Perhaps that is why so few people have attempted to tell the story of British immigration to the United States. The topic is so unwieldy, so broad, and so difficult to structure that most studies have understandably been general surveys of British immigration or have dealt with specific groups such as the Welsh or the Scots.

Thus William Van Vugt takes on a daunting task in his effort to bring order to such an immense topic and to explain the role British immigrants played in mid-nineteenth-century America. In *Britain to America* he looks at British immigrants from many different perspectives: their physical, social, and economic origins in Britain, their destinations (and destinies) in America, the degree to which they differed from their compatriots who remained behind, and the socioeconomic factors that prompted immigration.

He is successful for several reasons. First, he limits his study to the period from the mid-1830s to the mid-1860s, when hundreds of thousands of Britons migrated to America. Second, he effectively explains the social and economic forces that affected British immigration and immigrants. Finally, he uses not only the standard sources one might expect for such a study (census data, passenger lists, newspaper reports), but also county histories that tell about the lives of immigrants after their arrival in the United States. Van Vugt acknowledges the limitations of such sources, which focus primarily on "success stories," and tries to balance these with details of migrants who fared less well. The result is a work that offers insight into the lives of immigrants, the

causes of their migrations, and their contributions to the development of the United States.

The book takes a topical approach, focusing first on agriculture and agriculturalists in both Britain and America. Van Vugt thoughtfully discusses trends and events affecting British farmers. He then does the same for other professions, with chapters devoted to migrant miners, artisans and industrial workers, and professionals. He also devotes a single chapter to the Welsh and another to women. The book closes with a chapter about the interplay between these newly arrived residents and various social forces such as religion and temperance, the Civil War and slavery, and immigrant societies and cohesion.

The early chapters on agriculture and farmers are, in many respects, the most insightful and interesting. There Van Vugt effectively explains the economic and political issues affecting nineteenth-century agriculture on both sides of the Atlantic. Equally strong are his chapters on miners and on the Welsh. Unfortunately, the anecdotes and brief biographies taken from county histories become somewhat repetitive in these and some of the other chapters.

Other chapters, while informative, seem less concrete. Although there is no well-defined British culture region, landscape features such as house types, barns, and related structures, are very much a part of the immigrant story, and they deserve considerably more attention than they receive. Nor do readers get a strong sense of the contributions made by industrial workers, perhaps because the author draws overwhelmingly on examples and anecdotes from the Old Northwest rather than the large industrial centers in New England and the Mid-Atlantic. Similarly, he gives only scant attention to the British miners who worked the coal fields of Pennsylvania while examining in detail mining in the Upper Mississippi River Valley. In fact, the focus on the Old Northwest is so strong and so much to the exclusion of other parts of the country that one gets the sense that the book should be retitled to reflect this regional bias.

Despite these shortcomings, Van Vugt's work makes an important contribution. Many of his findings can logically be applied to settlement in the area surrounding the Old Northwest. By extension, then, the reader gains a sense of British impact on neighboring areas such as Iowa and Minnesota, especially in the realms of agriculture and mining. In this respect the work should be read by anyone seeking a greater understanding of the influence of those British immigrants who set sail for America.

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