Reviews


When one thinks of passenger ships and immigration, the first thoughts are usually of the great receiving halls which welcomed some 17 million persons at New York’s Ellis Island. There, newcomers from Europe were about to make the transition to life in the United States, as immigration officials and government agents assisted them in the bewildering process. In Immigration at the Golden Gate, Robert Eric Barde reminds us that there was another portal to the US, and that the experience of the roughly 200,000 who entered through that door—or, more accurately, who tried to—were vastly different from their East Coast immigrant brethren. Barde uses the particular case of one Chinese couple to tell the tale of Asian immigration to this country. With a deft eye for detail, an investigative journalist’s nose, a rich research agenda, and a talent for writing, the author communicates a little-known tale to his readers. The result is a far-ranging work that succeeds on various levels: as maritime history (his chapter on the “Rise and Fall of Pacific Mail” was a past winner of the Karl Kortum prize), as local history, and as an ethnic study. This is a book that I will turn to many times in the future, and I feel that I will learn something new with each reading.

Barde posits that while Ellis Island was designed to facilitate the processing of new Americans, Angel Island was designed to keep them out. With the passage of Chinese Exclusion Acts in the 1880s and the Gentleman’s Agreement with Japan in 1907, there were concerted efforts to stem the tide of immigrants from Asia. Located in the middle of San Francisco Bay, Angel Island housed a variety of government and bureaucratic institutions: from POW camps to army barracks and quarantine stations, this solemn piece of land witnessed any number of hardships. After its designation as the receiving station for “Asiatic” immigrants, it witnessed countless more. The situation on Angel Island was atrocious; Barde’s treatment, if it did nothing else, shows that clearly.

But this book is about more than just Angel Island. Barde also spends several chapters on the trans-Pacific passenger trade, including lengthy treatments of both the Pacific Mail and China Mail Steamship Companies. He discusses how the economic and logistical aspects of the industry mingled with social and political concerns, condemning some players to failure while allowing others to prosper. A look at one ship, Nippon Maru, allows Barde to extrapolate from this story and make grand conclusions about the experiences of many would-be Asian immigrants. It is an excellent exercise in historical analysis and raises as many questions as it answers: questions about racism, corruption, democracy, and civil rights. This, then, is a provocative look at some of the most important issues in American society while also serving as a definitive treatment of passenger ships and trans-Pacific immigration.

Robert Eric Barde’s Immigration at the Golden Gate is a hearty meal. It offers something to the serious scholar and to the armchair activist, and, while it is an easy read, it rewards a close and studious examination. It deserves a place on many reading lists, and should also find itself as a finalist for many accolades.

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In an age when any researcher can Google this and consult Wikipedia for that, what makes an expensive four-volume reference work stand apart from the options in cyberspace and the other books already on your shelf? John Hattendorf has assembled a talented and eclectic list of contributing authors to attack comprehensively the topic of maritime history. Experts from around the globe explore such varied maritime themes as science and technology, trade and politics, art and literature, military and naval affairs, institutional and organizational development, and sports and recreation. The resulting work is a truly unique assemblage of erudition. Whether used as a companion piece to other

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