Reviews


Author Robert Eric Barde has correctly identified *Immigration at the Golden Gate* as a "collection of essays" (p. 2) loosely organized around three themes: Detention and Angel Island, Transportation Across the Pacific, and Enforcement, covering the period from 1882 to the 1940s with a major focus on the 1910s. However, he is probably less accurate in claiming the book as a story on American immigration (p. 4), since most of the book focuses on the infrastructure and events that supported or hindered Asian immigration in the wake of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, such as U.S. policy, its enforcement, its enforcers, and the establishment of Angel Island, as well as transportation and the shipping companies. With one significant exception, we get very few glimpses of the immigrants themselves.

Those teaching courses focused on the Asian American and/or immigrant experience will find the essays under the first theme, Detention and Angel Island, the most relevant. Here, Barde recounts the interviews and details surrounding the detention and eventual admission to the U.S. of Quok Shee, "an alleged wife." By focusing on a specific individual, Barde is able to explore the context, issues, and individuals involved in Quok Shee's long detention, including her lawyers and their role in Chinese immigration legal cases, her supposed husband, and the arduous conditions she faced as the longest-documented detainee on Angel Island. Unfortunately, the essays in this section comprise a very slim part of the book, entailing a mere seventy-seven pages.

Barde, who has a background in political economy and is currently Deputy Director and Academic Coordinator of the Institute of Business and Economic Research at the University of California, Berkeley, provides a wealth of information for those more interested in developments in the shipping industry, including business practices, key players, and the nature of steerage travel from Asia. Clearly, Barde's interests are more obviously focused on transportation, with the longest essay, "Asiatic Steerage: Ship Travel and Asian Mass Migration," covering some sixty pages and detailing ship travel not only to the Golden Gate, but also to ports in Latin America. In this sense, the book's title is misleading, as the initial examination of Asian immigration in light of the Chinese Exclusion Act was only a beginning to other issues that Barde considers relevant to or overlapping his initial inquiry into the story of Quok Shee.

Finally, Barde turns to enforcement by examining the episodes that provoked U.S. officials
to action, such as a major smuggling scandal that was uncovered in 1915, or individuals such as John Birge Sawyer, who spent almost thirty years as a U.S. consular officer and another ten as an immigration inspector. Although Sawyer spent only eighteen months at Angel Island, his personal journals provide insight into the views of those entrusted with enforcement.

Barde provides small nuggets that one wishes he had explored further. For example, in the chapter "The Life and Death of the China Mail," he mentions that white-owned shipping lines smuggled in Chinese, while the China Mail was itself a Chinese and Chinese-American enterprise. He gives a small peek into the Chinese Six Companies, formed by San Francisco Chinese immigrants in the nineteenth century to protect themselves from the policies and actions of the greater San Francisco society. He also mentions that members of the Chinese-American community were small shareholders in the shipping line. One wishes to know more about these small investors and their connection to their community. In short, Barde misses an opportunity to shed greater light on the internal workings of the Chinese-American community in the early twentieth century in the face of exclusion, as well as the behavior of the Chinese Americans themselves.

Perhaps the major criticism of this book is the absence of a coherent narrative, so that the various essays that Barde wants us to consider become part of a whole. Barde makes the disclaimer that "The goal of this book is more modest: to provide detail, the 'thick' material that puts the flesh of description on the skeleton of analysis" (p. 4). Unfortunately, because he has not provided the clear connections among the different chapters, he is prone to giving an over-abundance of detail that will hold future researchers in good stead, but has lost the story that piqued his interest (and ours) in the first place: the impact of the Chinese Exclusion Act on immigrants such as Quok Shee. This book in its entirety would not be appropriate for classroom use.

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