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# From the Mother Country

*Oral Narratives of British Emigration  
to the United States, 1860-1940*

PhD Thesis

Mario Varricchio

*When you get older, you get very nostalgic and you don't remember what happened yesterday, but you start to remember things that happened ninety years ago* (Harry Sonnes, Ellis Island Oral History Project)

*There's little I can tell you, but you're welcome to what little I know, and more that I feel* (A Scotch quarryman's widow, Federal Writers' Project life histories)

*I'm so happy that you got here in time. I said, 'This is my last hurrah'* (Agnes Schilling, Ellis Island Oral History Project)

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## Abstract

This study investigates the experience of British (English, Scottish and Welsh) emigrants to the United States in the 1860-1940 period. It is based on the analysis of two large corpora of oral histories, about 180 interviews in total, preserved in libraries as well as archives and libraries' special collections and manuscript departments scattered throughout the United States. In particular, the thesis draws on the interviews conducted by the Ellis Island Oral History Project researchers since the 1970s and the "life histories" gathered by the Federal Writers' Project fieldworkers during the New Deal era. The critical examination of these sources makes it possible to shed new light on an extended period of British emigration to the United States, including the decades following 1900, which have largely been neglected by scholars so far. In fact, the FWP life histories of British immigrants have never been tapped by scholars before, and the same is true as regards the Ellis Island accounts, with the exception of the interviews with Scottish immigrants.

The Introduction to the thesis presents the subject, scope, structure and objectives of the work, also providing a brief overview of the historiography in the field; the first chapter discusses both the reliability of oral histories as historical sources and their peculiarities; the second chapter specifically deals with the Ellis Island and Federal Writers' Project interviews, on the fieldworkers' research strategy and the interview approach they adopted, providing an in-depth critical analysis of the strengths and limits of the documents on which the dissertation's conclusions are based. The following chapters trace the experiences of men and women who left Great Britain for the U.S. by dwelling upon the pre-emigration, emigration proper and post-emigration phases, and identify common aspects in Britons' migratory experience as well as differences due to their age, gender and nationality.

The analysis of the post-emigration phase focuses on Britons' economic conditions, work activity and social mobility in America, as well as on cultural and identity issues. In particular, the last two sections of the thesis put to the test the widespread notions of British immigrants' economic success and of their cultural "invisibility" in America. In fact, the evidence offered by the Ellis Island and Federal Writers' Project oral histories challenge the image of Britons as successful immigrants who blended into American society relatively quickly and easily.

## Acknowledgements

First and foremost I wish to thank the men and women who, in the 1930s and in the last four decades, agreed to be interviewed by the Federal Writers' Project and the Ellis Island Oral History Project fieldworkers. I am also sincerely grateful to the people who gathered the oral histories on which this work is based, though I have not spared criticism of the programmes and the way the interviews were conducted. Indeed, the necessary precondition that provided me with the opportunity to learn a lot about the migratory experience, ultimately the life, of millions of men and women who left their native country to start anew in a foreign land was the encounter between individuals who had a story to tell and people who realized such story was worth recording.

Mention must also be made of the staff of the libraries where I retrieved and consulted the primary and secondary sources used in this work. I would like to thank the personnel of the Edinburgh University Library, The National Library of Scotland, Widener Library at Harvard University and the New York Public Library. In particular, I am indebted to the following librarians and archivists in the United States: Janet Levine, George Tselos and Jeffrey S. Dosik (Ellis Island Immigration Museum, New York); Laura Katz Smith (Archives & Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries, Storrs, CT); Gary Domitz and Gene Warren (Special Collections Department, Idaho State University Library, Pocatello, ID); David Vancil (Rare Book and Special Collections, Cunningham Memorial Library, Indiana State University, Terre Haute, IN); Judy Lilly (Archive Collection, Salina Public Library, Salina, KS); Steven R. Wolz (Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, NE); Beth Getz (Wilson Library, Manuscript Department, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, NC); L. Lotte Bailey, State Historical Society of North Dakota, Bismarck, ND); Judith Michener (Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma City, OK); Todd Shaffer (Oregon State Library, Salem, OR); Linda Shopes (Pennsylvania State Archives, Harrisburg, PA); Jennifer D. McDaid (The Library of Virginia, Richmond, VA); Shirley Lewis and Trevor James Bond (Washington State Library, Olympia, WA).

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# *Introduction*

The writing of ethnic history is both necessary and possible. It need neither be justified nor defended. The collective voice of the people, once silenced, has a right to be heard. Oral history is not only a tool or method for recovering history; it is also a theory of history which maintains that the common folk and the dispossessed have a history and that this history must be written.<sup>1</sup>

I have learned and hope to learn from this material things about people that cannot be learned by reading books written from other books [...]. This is no trivial matter. The people, all the people, must be known, they must be heard.<sup>2</sup>

## **I. Scope**

This work aims at breaking new ground in the study of British emigration to the United States from the 1860s to the 1930s through the analysis of oral histories. In particular, it draws upon interviews with English, Scottish and Welsh emigrants to the United States collected during the Great Depression era by the Federal Writers' Project – a New Deal governmental agency which employed thousands of jobless white-collar workers, artists and intellectuals to develop programmes investigating the nature of American identity and culture – and produced from the 1970s by the staff of the National Parks Service and Oral History Office of the Ellis Island Museum in New York City. Rather unusually, therefore, this dissertation revisits interviews which were collected by others. Actually, the secondary analysis of oral history data is 'an aspect of oral history research which is, as yet, undeveloped both in terms of practice and reflection.'<sup>3</sup> Needless to say, scholars who exploit archived oral material need to be aware of the social and historical contexts in which the interviews were produced. That is why, in Chapter 2, a detailed discussion of the context of production and key aspects of the primary sources utilized in this work has been conducted. Indeed, one the objectives of this study is to offer some reflections on the nature of the Ellis Island oral history programme and the Federal Writers' Project undertaking.

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<sup>1</sup> Gary Okihiro, "The Writing of Ethnic History," in *Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*, ed. Willa K. Baum and David Dunaway (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1984), 206.

<sup>2</sup> William T. Couch, ed. *These Are Our Lives* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1939), xii-xiii.

<sup>3</sup> Joanna Bornat, "A Second Take: Revisiting Interviews With a Different Purpose". *Oral History* 31, 1 (Spring 2003), 47.

The FWP interviews with British immigrants have never been exploited by scholars before in critical essays, and the same is true, with the exception of the interviews with Scottish immigrants, as regards the Ellis Island accounts.<sup>4</sup> The latter are all preserved at the Ellis Island Museum Oral History Office, while the FWP “life histories”<sup>5</sup> are located in many repositories in the United States. Some of them are housed at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., and have been made available online through the *American Memory Project* site, whereas others are to be found in the archives of historical societies as well as in the Manuscript and Special Collections Departments of various libraries and institutions scattered throughout the country.<sup>6</sup>

As will be emphasized in Chapter 1, oral sources are a unique tool to reconstruct contemporary history, especially the history of the so-called “voiceless”, marginalized people such as working-class emigrants. Actually, a fairly significant number of first and later-generation British immigrant narratives have already been recorded,<sup>7</sup> and a

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<sup>4</sup> For the sake of brevity, the interviews collected by the Ellis Island Oral History Office will be designated as “Ellis Island interviews” in the text, and those gathered by the Federal Writers’ Project as “FWP interviews” (using FWP as a convenient abbreviation).

<sup>5</sup> The widespread circulation of this expression to name the FWP interviews is probably mainly due to the fact that it duplicates the original terminology adopted by the Project researchers, which in turn derived from the diffusion of qualitative methodology within the field of social sciences at the time. In fact, the 1930s were the heyday of social documentary in the United States, and the life history approach represented one of the pillars on which the documentary method rested. Actually, collecting the voice of the people meant changing the way of doing scholarly research and had a political import, it was a reaction ‘against the dehumanizing effects of reducing vivid human documents to cold statistical analysis. In the language of the period, the “life study method” was descriptive, documentary, and literary, and was contrasted with the statistical, quantitative, and scientific mode of research.’ Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, “Authoring Lives,” *Journal of Folklore Research*, 26 (May-August 1989), 130.

<sup>6</sup> Despite the fact that, as early as 1940, John D. Newsom, the recently appointed head of the FWP after Henry Alsberg’s dismissal, foresaw the importance of preserving the unpublished material produced by the state offices and that the state supervisors were asked to provide the main office with two copies of all their records, interviews, unpublished manuscripts etc., a part of the material did not reach Washington or was not kept at the Library of Congress. In fact, perhaps ‘also because the Library of Congress did not have room for all the material from the state offices, the Writers’ Program, early in 1942, began to look for depositories in as many states as possible, utilizing such institutions as state historical societies, universities, and public libraries.’ Jerre Mangione, *The Dream and the Deal. The Federal Writers’ Project 1935-1943* (New York: Avon Books, 1972), 370-71.

<sup>7</sup> See the interviews with first-generation Welsh immigrants and people of Welsh descent preserved at the Regional Oral History Office of the University of California, Berkeley (Megan King Jones Davidson, Idris Evans, Mary Elizabeth Wilson, David Wayne Painter and Reverend Robert Verne Jones). Interviews with first and second-generation British immigrants, as well as with people of more distant British ancestry, are also held at the Archives and Manuscript Division of the Oklahoma Historical Society in Oklahoma City (Mr. Charles Berends, Mrs. Nellie Gray, Mr. Edward A. Mitchell, Mr. Ed Story, Mrs. Patty Kelly, and Mrs. Marion Collins). More examples are provided by the oral history collections of the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission in Harrisburg, which contain many interviews with first and second-generation Welsh immigrants (Betty and Myra Williams, Lewis Enis, David O. McCreary, Lester ‘Tig’ Jones, William Milo Williams, Kilburn Gwen R., Williams Edward, Hughes Morris, Bradley Gertrude W., Watkins McClarin, Morgan Eva, John Haydn, Dorothy Reese Jones, Williams Helen, Littlejohn Ethel, Price Thomas, Hoskins Betty, and Hughes Ivor) and by the two interviews with Scottish women preserved at the Idaho Historical Society (Betty Hitt and Jessie Nellie Ettles Allan). The voice of British labour activists and union leaders has also been taped, often as part of



few have also been published.<sup>8</sup> However, until now, oral histories have been decidedly underexploited in the study of British emigration to the United States.<sup>9</sup> The fact that the two most important collections of interviews available – indeed, those created by the Federal Writers’ Project and the Ellis Island Museum Oral History Office – have been almost totally ignored by scholars so far testifies to a major shortcoming in this field of research.

The tapping of oral sources, it is worth noting, makes it possible to adopt a fresh perspective on the British diaspora to the U.S.. Indeed, this work deals with what is traditionally defined as the “facts” of the emigration process – the importance of remittances to finance the journey overseas, the length of the voyage, the details of the medical inspection at Ellis Island, workers’ harsh impact with the American job market, to give but a few examples – as well as with the emigrants’ feelings, the emotional dimension attached to their relocation and life overseas. Actually, the distinction between “factual” and “emotional”/“non-factual” dimensions of experience is spurious, since a human being’s feelings and emotional responses are undeniably “facts” too, not least because they affect people’s behaviour and translate into tangible actions.

This work investigates the experience of *first-generation* immigrants. It is worth noting, though, that references to the experience of second or even later-generation British immigrants will occasionally be made – only in the chapters dealing with

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wide-ranging studies of specific struggles or climactic periods of trade union activity. This is the case with the above-mentioned accounts utilized by Steve Babson for his volume on Detroit auto-workers as well as with some of the recollections housed at the Pennsylvania State University. The Archives of Labor & Urban Affairs collections at Wayne State University in Detroit preserve interviews with J. W. Anderson, Douglas Fraser, Norman R. Matthews, Elizabeth McCracken, Henry McCusker, Dave Miller, William Stevenson, Harry Southwell, and Leonard Woodcock. The Department of Labor Studies at the Pennsylvania State University houses interviews with John C. Lawson, Martin Burns, Tom Murray, and John Chorey. See also Columbia University Oral History Research Office, Butler Library, New York City: interviews with John Brophy, John Spargo and Mark Starr.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Alan Upshall, ed., *Notes From the Past: Conversations with the Welsh of the Puget Sound Region* (Seattle: Puget Sound West Association, 1999) and *The Welsh Way. Oral History of the Long Creek Welsh Community in Iowa* (Iowa City: Iowa Welsh Society, 1995).

<sup>9</sup> The few contributions dealing with the post-1900 British diaspora to the U.S. often make use of oral histories. This is the case with: Angela McCarthy, *Personal Narratives of Irish and Scottish Migration 1921-1965. ‘For Spirit and Adventure’* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2007); Id., “Ethnic Networks and Identities Among Inter-war Scottish Migrants in North America,” in *A Global Clan. Scottish Migrant Networks and Identities Since the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Angela McCarthy, 203-226 (London and New York: Tauris Academic Studies, 2006); Shirley Ewart, *Cornish Mining Families of Grass Valley California* (New York: AMS Press, 1989); Steve Babson, “British and Irish Militants in the Detroit UAW in the 1930s,” in *Labor Divided: Race and Ethnicity in United States Labor Struggles 1835-1960*, ed. Robert Asher and Charles Stephenson, 227-245 (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990); Steve Babson, *Building the Union. Skilled Workers and Anglo-Gaelic Immigrants in the Rise of the UAW* (New Brunswick, NJ, and London: Rutgers University Press, 1991); Kenneth Lines, *British and Canadians Immigration to the United States since 1920* (San Francisco: R & E Research Associates, 1978). Only McCarthy, though, employs interviews as principal source material – indeed, the Ellis Island narratives, as we shall see in more detail in Chapter 2.

Britons' life in America, of course – to better illustrate or strengthen specific points under discussion. It is also useful to specify the age bracket of the individuals who are termed “children” in the thesis. Immigrants aged 20 or older at the time of leaving are defined as “adults”, while the expression “young adults” is also used in the text, indicating people who were 14 to 19 years old when they crossed the Atlantic (indeed, it seemed inappropriate to define boys and girls in their teens as simply “adults”). By contrast, the term “children” has been reserved for those immigrants who were 13 years of age or younger when they landed in America, constituting the so-called “1.5” immigrant generation.<sup>10</sup> Since hardly any of the FWP and Ellis Island informants was 13 or 14 at the age of migration, in the interviews the group of child immigrants is essentially made up of individuals who were 12 or younger when they left Britain, while the group of young adults is mostly composed of people who were 15 to 19 years old. The distinction between “children” and other emigrants corresponds roughly to a division between preschool and school age newcomers on the one hand, and working-age immigrants on the other. As we shall see, children had different experiences from (young) adults immigrants both in the phase preceding emigration and during the ocean crossing. Besides, the notion of “1.5” generation will prove useful when discussing work and mobility in America and, perhaps even more so, issues of culture and identity.

Apart from a few exceptions, the FWP and Ellis Island informants belonged to the working-class, whose members made up the large majority of British emigrants to the United States in the period under consideration. In fact, the Federal Writers' Project researchers generally ‘talked to few middle-class, white-collar workers, and even fewer of the destitute unemployed. [...] The hard-working poor predominate,’<sup>11</sup> while the Ellis Island Oral History Project interviewees were people of such modest means as to be able to afford only steerage or third class passage to America. Therefore, in addition to the experience of English, Scottish and Welsh immigrants to America, this work will shed light on working-class life in general on either side of the Atlantic.

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<sup>10</sup> Rubén G. Rumbaut coined the concept of “1.5” generation to describe the situation of immigrant children who ‘immigrate before puberty (about age twelve) and complete their education in the country of destination.’ Subsequently he ‘distinguished among the fundamentally different developmental stages and social contexts of children who immigrate before the age of five (preschool) and between the ages of thirteen and seventeen (adolescence and secondary school), and labelled them “1.75ers” and “1.25ers” respectively.’ Rubén G. Rumbaut, “Assimilation and Its Discontents: Ironies and Paradoxes”, in *The Handbook of International Migration. The American Experience*, eds. Charles Hirschman, Philip Kasinitz and Josh DeWind (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1999), 194, note 13.

<sup>11</sup> Ann Banks, ed., *First-person America* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991; 1980c), xii-xiii.

“Class” is certainly one of the most contested terms in the lexicon of historians and social scientists. Some authors distinguish classes on the basis of economic indicators such as occupation and income, and of the distinction between individuals who own the means of productions and people who, by contrast, only own (and therefore sell) their labour power; others focus on life styles; yet others emphasize class consciousness and thus argue that class *happens* rather than just *is*; finally, some scholars reject objective definitions of class and essentially rely on the opinion of individuals themselves to define their class position.<sup>12</sup> There is no space here for a detailed discussion of the complex concept of “class”, nor such a discussion appears to be necessary for the purpose of this study. A general definition will suffice.

The “working class” cannot simply defined as manual workers; the progressive decline, in the twentieth century, of traditional blue-collar occupations in Western societies and the growth of routine proletarianized white-collar work would challenge the theoretical basis of such a notion. Yet it is also true that, in the period under consideration (1860-1940), the working class was largely made up manual workers. In any case, none of the FWP and Ellis Island informants who left their homeland as adults seem to have held one of those routine office jobs, typically performed by women, that became more and more available as the twentieth century progressed. They were factory workers, miners, rural labourers, domestics, shop workers. In short, in this study, the FWP and Ellis Island interviewees are defined as working class because they sold their labour and worked with their hands, or were the (school age) children of members of the working class. Married women, it deserves to be noted, had carried out paid work as girls and often continued to do so after marriage. Even when they “just” did housework after they got married, they remained the wives of working class men.

Unfortunately not all the interviews specify the job informants or their parents were doing before departure (nor do they always specify immigrants’ occupation in the U.S., for that matter). Yet the interviews provide various other elements concerning the informants’ material conditions in Britain – the house where they lived, for example, or the way in which they paid for their transatlantic journey tickets (indeed, the very fact that they travelled steerage or third class) – which clarify that they belonged to the working-class. Finally, before proceeding, it needs to be remembered that when we identify the British immigrants whose lives are examined here as working class we

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<sup>12</sup> Joanna Bourke, *Working-Class Cultures in Britain 1890-1960* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 1-4.

mean that they belonged to that class at the time of leaving – the issue of social mobility in America, as we shall see, is discussed in Chapter 5.

A total amount of 177 interviews have been analysed for this study, 80 of which gathered by the FWP fieldworkers and 97 by the Ellis Island oral historians. The large majority of them are with immigrants who were born in Britain; the remainder with informants who supply useful information about a variety of aspects of British immigrants' life in the United States.<sup>13</sup>

The interviews which trace, in greater or lesser detail, the life of British immigrants and deal with issues related to the informants' nationality and cultural identity need to be distinguished from the accounts that help to illuminate aspects of Briton's experience in America but do not constitute the "core" documentary material on which this work draws. These have been designated as "other interviews" in the bibliography. More specifically, 35 out of 80 FWP interviews belong to this group (which includes most of the accounts in the American Memory Project site) while only 5 out of 97 Ellis Island oral histories do. The FWP testimonies designated as "other interviews" focus on specific topics, such as the Welsh eisteddfod or the activity of Sheffield's knifemakers, for instance, and include accounts given by non-British informants. As to the additional Ellis Island interviews, 4 out of 5 were conducted with informants who were born in the United States from British parents and one with a man, born in Poland, who moved to England as a nine-months old baby and then emigrated to America as a seven years old child.<sup>14</sup>

By and large, the sources reflect in percentage terms the differences in the emigration flow of the three British nationality cohorts, with English people largely surpassing Scottish emigrants and the Welsh representing, by far, the smallest group.<sup>15</sup> In contrast, while men are twice as many as women in the FWP corpus, in the Ellis Island corpus the opposite is true, resulting in a higher total number of female informants, which does not mirror the historical reality of emigration with regard to gender cohorts<sup>16</sup> As far as

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<sup>13</sup> For short biographical profiles of the informants see Appendix I.

<sup>14</sup> The information provided in Appendix I for each of the above-mentioned supplementary interviews clarifies the reason why they have been treated as "other" primary sources.

<sup>15</sup> Data on British emigration to the U.S. is provided in Rowland Tappan Berthoff, *British Immigrants in Industrial America, 1790-1950* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1968, 1953c), 5.

<sup>16</sup> The share of British women crossing the ocean in the period under consideration was by no means negligible, though always lower than that of men. In the 1840s the percentage of women leaving England for the United States was about one third of the total emigrant population. In the subsequent decades this figure rose slightly, so that by the turn of the century the share of women's departures was close to 40%.

age is concerned, it must be underlined that many of the informants were children when they emigrated (a sizeable number of those interviewed by the FWP fieldworkers and the large majority of those interviewed for the Ellis Island Oral History Project). However, informants who were children at the time of leaving (as well as, often, those who were young adults) related their own experience as well as that of their parents, thus offering a wider picture of the migratory process of British citizens in the period under investigation.

More precisely, taking into account only the “core” interviews, two thirds of the Ellis Island informants entered America as children, 16 out of 92 when they were between 14 and 19 years of age and just 12 when they were 20 or older. Obviously, this is due to the fact that most of the Ellis Island interviews were conducted from the 1990s onwards with informants who emigrated in the first three decades of the twentieth century. The FWP sample is much more balanced: the number of child and adult emigrants is virtually identical (12 and 13 out of 45 respectively), while 8 of the FWP informants crossed the ocean as young adults. Unfortunately, in as many as 12 of the life histories the informant’s age is not specified.<sup>17</sup>

As we have already pointed out, men are twice as numerous as women in the FWP core interviews (30 and 15 respectively), yet such discrepancy is counterbalanced by the fact that 17 out of 35 FWP “other interviews” are with women. In the Ellis Island corpus the interviews with female migrants of all nationalities amount to 60, as opposed to 32 interviews with men, reflecting perhaps the higher life expectancy of women. As far as nationality is concerned, the FWP corpus includes the life histories of 30 English, 13 Scottish and 2 Welsh immigrants (the very small number of Welsh informants is partly compensated for by the fact that 5 FWP “other interviews” focus on Welsh customs and culture). In the Ellis Island corpus the total of English emigrants is also the highest (46 out of 92 core interviews, exactly half of them), yet the amount of Scottish informants (one third of the total, namely 31 out of 92) is quite significant, reflecting the peak of departures from Scotland in the 1920s. Predictably, the amount of Welsh informants is the smallest – 15, about a sixth of the total. However, the number of interviews with Welsh emigrants is disproportionately high in percentage terms in

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Charlotte Erickson, “Englishwomen in America in the Nineteenth Century: Expectations and Reality,” in *Leaving England. Essays on British Emigration in the Nineteenth Century* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994), 241-43.

<sup>17</sup> However, even if all the informants whose age is unknown were children or adults, a near impossibility, the FWP sample would remain more varied in terms of age than the Ellis Island corpus.

comparison with the number of English and Scottish informants. This counterbalances the dearth of interviews with Welsh men and women in the FWP sample, and substantially increases the number of Welsh informants in the two corpora taken together.

The following tables summarize the essential demographic data concerning the FWP and Ellis Island informants:

**Federal Writers' Project – 45 core interviews. Sex and nationality**

	<b>English</b>	<b>Scottish</b>	<b>Welsh</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Men</b>	19	10	1	<b>30</b>
<b>Women</b>	11	3	1	<b>15</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>45</b>

**Ellis Island Oral History Project – 92 core interviews. Sex and nationality**

	<b>English</b>	<b>Scottish</b>	<b>Welsh</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Men</b>	16	9	7	<b>32</b>
<b>Women</b>	30	22	8	<b>60</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>92</b>

**Age at departure – 137 core interviews**

	<b>Federal Writers' Project</b>	<b>Ellis Island Oral History Project</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Children (0-13)</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>75</b>
<b>Young adults (14-19)</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>Adults (20 → )</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>Age unknown</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>13</b>

**Recapitulatory table – 137 core interviews**

<b>English</b>	<b>76</b>
<b>Scottish</b>	<b>44</b>
<b>Welsh</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Men</b>	<b>62</b>
<b>Women</b>	<b>75</b>

<b>Children</b>	<b>75</b>
<b>Young adults</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>Adults</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>Age unknown</b>	<b>13</b>

Possible criticisms and reservations about the use of oral testimonies as historical sources will be dealt with in the next chapter. In connection to the foregoing, though, the issue of “representativeness” needs to be briefly addressed here.

The two corpora of interviews analysed in this work are not composed of statistically representative samples. They were not meant to be. The FWP fieldworkers did not adopt systematic, “scientific” methods of selection of their informants, and neither do the Ellis Island researchers. The former basically interviewed all the people they were able to find who could provide information on a given subject. As Ann Banks has pointed out: ‘Federal Writers were encouraged to arrange interviews through community or work-related organizations, but that suggestion was often ignored in favour of chance contacts. Some writers interviewed their relatives; many more talked to friends or casual acquaintances.’<sup>18</sup> The Ellis Island interviewees are located mainly through a process of self-selection. While visiting the Ellis Island Museum, people who passed through American Golden Door might fill out a questionnaire asking for their essential personal details and for a brief description of some aspects of their immigration experience. Later on, researchers working on the oral history project identify potentially “good” informants, who are contacted to arrange an interview.<sup>19</sup>

Yet, before raising doubts as to the soundness of conclusions reached from the analysis of an “unrepresentative” corpus of documents one should remember that, as Alistair Thomson and A. James Hammerton aptly observe, ‘[h]istorical sources are never comprehensive and no sample is ever fully representative.’<sup>20</sup> In fact, what Hammerton and Thomson affirm about the interviews they have utilized in their study of British emigration to Australia – ‘on the whole the richness and diversity of experience evident in the accounts [...] outweighs the risk of sample bias’<sup>21</sup> – also essentially applies in our case. Indeed, the possibility of accessing the life of many individuals is undoubtedly an advantage for researchers, enabling them to conduct comparative analysis. Yet it is also worth noting that, in some cases, the information supplied by an interviewee cannot be set against statements made by other informants,

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<sup>18</sup> Banks, *First Person America*, xvii.

<sup>19</sup> George Tselos (Supervisory Archivist and Head of Reference Services at the Ellis Island Museum), email to author, 19 August 2010.

<sup>20</sup> Hammerton and Thomson, *Ten Pound Poms*, 19.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. Insightful reflections on the question of representativeness, as applied to migrant correspondence, are contained in David Fitzpatrick’s Introduction to his *Oceans of Consolation. Personal Accounts of Irish Migration to Australia* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1994); see especially 28-30.

or checked in different sources. This, some scholars have noted, is a distinctive feature of oral history that does not reduce its heuristic potential. Actually, ‘the single life story can, by itself, illuminate the migration experience. Anthropologists often refer to the “telling case”, a single case study which might not be typical or representative but which offers deep and intimate insights [...].’<sup>22</sup>

The interviews gathered by the FWP and Ellis Island fieldworkers do not provide quantitative, numerically measurable evidence, but reveal general patterns as well as peculiar migratory experiences. They are far from flawless and often defective, as will be pointed out in Chapter 2, yet they make it possible to provide an informative portrait of numerous aspects of Britons’ movement overseas in its three main stages – the pre-emigration, emigration proper and post-emigration phases – in the period under examination. Indeed, the sources examined in this work are sufficiently numerous to allow researchers to draw comparisons and make cautious generalizations. Furthermore, the two corpora of sources possess a high degree of consistency in terms of the informants’ social class, as we have seen, and they include a significant number of narratives by men, women, child and adult immigrants of all three British nationalities (English, Scottish and Welsh).

The conclusions about British immigrants’ migratory experience drawn in this work are normally based on evidence provided by many interviews. In some cases, though, speculative generalizations will be made about Britons’ experiences based on what just one or only a few informants say. The principle of the “telling case”, or rather of the “telling passage” of an interview, also applies when the researcher examines a large corpus of sources. Actually, some informants may discuss aspects of their life that illuminate common elements of British immigrants’ experience that have been overlooked in other interviews.

Finally, it hardly needs to be remembered that the conclusions reached in this work, the glimpses into the lives of British immigrants to America offered by the FWP and Ellis Island oral histories, await to be confirmed or refined by further research.

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<sup>22</sup> Hammerton and Thomson, *Ten Pound Poms*, 20. A discussion of the emphasis laid by some scholars on the heuristic value of the single life history or of a limited number of interviews is provided in Trevor Lummis, *Listening to History. The Authenticity of Oral Evidence* (London: Hutchinson, 1987), 107-114.



## II. Ground

Important facets of Britons' experience in America in the nineteenth century have been superficially examined or virtually ignored – the emigration experience of women and unskilled labourers, the associational culture of the English, the religious dimension of English and Scottish emigrants' life, the political activities of British immigrants and British-Americans, to give some relevant examples. However, there exist several good wide-ranging monographs on the exodus of Britons to the United States in this period, along with many competent essays and articles treating a variety of general and specific topics.<sup>23</sup> Different ground has been covered for the different British nationalities; Scottish, Welsh and Cornish immigrants have attracted more attention than the English, due to their distinctive cultural traits and stronger ethnic identity.<sup>24</sup> Scholars have also produced a few notable studies of labour issues and specific categories of British emigrant workers,<sup>25</sup> as well as directed substantial attention to British Mormonism in the U.S.<sup>26</sup> With respect to the second half of the nineteenth century, therefore, the main

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<sup>23</sup> Aside from the classic masterful volume by Rowland T. Berthoff – *British Immigrants in Industrial America* – good surveys on the nineteenth-century British emigration to the USA are: Wilbur S. Shepperson, *British Emigration to North America. Projects and Opinions in the Early Victorian Period* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1957), Maldwyn A. Jones, “The Background to Emigration from Great Britain in Nineteenth Century,” *Perspectives in American History* 7 (1973): 3-92, William Van Vugt, *Britain to America. Mid-Nineteenth-Century Immigrants to the United States* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999) and, by the same author, *British Buckeyes. The English, Scots, & Welsh in Ohio* (Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 2006).

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Erickson, *Leaving England*; Ferenc Morton Szasz, *Scots in the North American West, 1790-1917* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2000); Malcolm Gray, “Scottish Emigration: The Social Impact of Agrarian Change in the Rural Lowlands, 1775-1875,” *Perspectives in American History* 7 (1973): 95-174; Edward G. Hartmann, *Americans from Wales* (Boston: The Christopher Publishing House, 1967); Elwyn T. Ashton, *The Welsh in the United States* (Hove, Sussex: Caldra House, 1984); William D. Jones, *Wales in America. Scranton and the Welsh* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1993); Alan Conway, “Welsh Emigration to the United States,” *Perspectives in American History* 7 (1973): 177-271; Arthur C. Todd, *The Cornish Miner in America* (Truro: D. Bradford 1967); A.L. Rowse, *The Cornish in America* (London: Macmillan, 1969); John Rowe, *The Hard-Rock Men: Cornish Immigrants and the North American Mining Frontier* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1974); Philip Payton, *The Cornish Overseas. A History of Cornwall's 'Great Migration'* (Fowey: Cornwall Editions, 1999), in particular 129-160, 201-227 and 323-347.

<sup>25</sup> This is the case with the above-mentioned works on Cornish immigration (when dealing with the Cornish, the ethnic and occupational dimensions largely overlap) as well as with John H. M. Laslett, *Colliers across the Sea. A Comparative Study of Class Formation in Scotland and the American Mid-West, 1830-1924* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000); Richard D. Margrave, *The Emigration of Silk Workers from England to the United States in the Nineteenth Century*, with Special Reference to Coventry, Macclesfield, Paterson, New Jersey, and South Manchester, Connecticut (New York and London: Garland, 1986). As far as union activity is concerned see Clifton K. Yearley, *Britons in American Labor: A History of the Influence of the United Kingdom Immigrants on American Labor, 1820-1914* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1957).

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Philip A.M. Taylor, *Expectations Westwar. The Mormons and the Emigration of their British Converts in the Nineteenth Century* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1965); Ronald D. Dennis, *The Call of Zion. The Story of the First Welsh Mormon Emigration* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Religious Studies Center, 1987); Rebecca Bartholomew, *Audacious Women. Early British Mormon Immigrants*

novelty of this work is represented by the fact that it casts a *different* light on the history of the British exodus to the United States. Truly, so far only a few books have been based on a critical examination and/or presentation of first-hand accounts (as it happens, exclusively letters) of the British diaspora to America in this period.<sup>27</sup>

By contrast, there is a period of sustained emigration from Great Britain which researchers have largely overlooked until now, namely the first three decades of the twentieth-century. Given the significance of the phenomenon, the paucity of studies on this subject is indeed glaring. In fact, from 1900 to 1930 a total of about 1,200,000

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(Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 1995). Among the relatively recent book essays and journal articles see Frederick S. Buchanan, "Scots Among the Mormons," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 36, 4 (Fall 1968): 328-352; Ray J. Davis, "Law and the Nineteenth-Century British Mormon Migration," in *Mormon in Early Victorian Britain*, eds. Richard L. Jensen and Malcolm R. Thorp (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1989), 243-257; Dean L. May, "Fleeing Babylon: The English Mormon Migration to Alpine, Utah," in *European Immigrants in the American West. Community Histories*, ed. Frederick C. Luebke (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1998), 33-48.

<sup>27</sup> See the excellent collections of letters edited by Alan Conway and Charlotte Erickson, which enable the reader to more than glimpse the process of migration and its impact on the immigrants themselves Alan Conway, *The Welsh in America. Letters from the Immigrants* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1961); Charlotte Erickson, *Invisible Immigrants. The Adaptation of English and Scottish Immigrants in Nineteenth-Century America* (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1972). The wealth of documents presented in Conway's volume describes the experiences of a wide array of individuals who emigrated to various regions of the United States. The letters were written to friends and relatives by farmers, coalminers, quarrymen, iron puddlers, steel workers, religious ministers through most of the nineteenth century. Erickson's *Invisible Immigrants* only contains private letters, as opposed to documents which had first appeared in papers or other publications. They shed light on the migration experience of several different social groups, though the sample on which Erickson draws is not perfectly balanced, as the author readily admits, since the correspondence of ordinary labourers is clearly underrepresented. Recently, David Gerber has produced a lucid in-depth study of the correspondence of British immigrants to North America in the nineteenth century. His analysis is centred on the process of writing as well as on the physicality of the letter, on aspects such as the start, continuation and termination of correspondence, the rhythm and frequency of writing, the fashioning of self through writing and the immigrants' relation with their correspondents in the Old Country. Interestingly, social, economic and cultural issues – such as negotiations on the payment of postal expenses or apprehension about one's performance as writer with regard to both form and content – enter the discussion when they impinge on the act of writing. David A. Gerber, *Authors of Their Lives. The Personal Correspondence of British Immigrants to North America in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2006). Finally, William Van Vugt has assembled a remarkable collection of emigrants' letters and other documentary material (such as county history biographies, promotional pamphlets, newspaper articles or excerpts from immigration guides) concerning British immigration to the United States between 1776 and 1914. This four-volume publication (which features a general introduction, volume introductions and headnotes to each document) includes more than 230 unpublished letters sourced from public and private archives in both the United Kingdom and the United States. Most of the material, it is worth noting, relates to emigration before the Civil War (three volumes out of four). Also, unfortunately, the last volume features only one letter written in the twentieth century (1911), and does not concern the experience of the writer in America. In fact, in this letter William Mellor, an English emigrant who became the Secretary of the Nebraska State Board of Agriculture, tells his relatives in Lancashire about his recent trip to Britain. William Van Vugt, ed. *British Immigration to the United States, 1776-1914*, Vols. I: *Building a Nation, 1776-1826*; II: *The Age of Jackson, 1829-1847*; III: *The Developing Nation, 1848-59*; IV: *Civil War and Industry, 1860-1914* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2009). William Mellor's letter is reproduced in Vol. IV, 111-113.

Britons entered the United States: about 800,000 of them were English, 360,000 Scottish and 44,000 Welsh.<sup>28</sup>

A significant development in the field of emigration studies in relatively recent times is detectable above all in the field of *Scottish* emigration history. Indeed, in the last quarter of a century a small army of scholars have been producing ground-breaking work on Scottish internal and external migration. The turning point in this area of research was represented by the collection of essays edited by Thomas M. Devine at the beginning of the 1990s, which forcefully placed the budding field of emigration studies at the centre of the Scottish historiographical agenda.<sup>29</sup> The volume had a global scope, yet none of the authors concentrated on the twentieth century or the United States. Various other contributions on Scottish emigration overseas – this time also covering the 1920-1930 decade, a period of mass exodus from Scotland – appeared during the 1990s and early 2000s, many of which authored by Marjory Harper. These contributions, though, are mainly focussed on Canada.<sup>30</sup>

In very recent years volumes and essays on the global movement of the Scots, especially on their presence across the British Empire, have continued to be produced.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, most of the work that has been published up to now by students of Scottish

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<sup>28</sup> Berthoff, *British Immigrants in Industrial America*, 5. In the 1930s emigration to the United States was reduced to a trickle owing to the effects of the Great Depression.

<sup>29</sup> Thomas M. Devine, ed., *Scottish Emigration and Scottish Society. Proceedings of the Scottish Historical Studies Seminar, University of Strathclyde 1990-1991* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1992). Previously, Marjory Harpers had conducted a broad survey of various aspects of nineteenth-century Scottish emigration overseas featuring chapters on Canada, United States and the Australasian region. Cf. Marjory Harper, *Emigration from North-East Scotland. Vol. I. Willing Exiles* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1988), 242-271 for the section devoted to the USA. The second volume of this work is entirely focussed on Canada: Marjory Harper, *Emigration from North-East Scotland. Vol. II. Beyond the Broad Atlantic* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1988).

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Marjory Harper, "Emigrant Strikebreakers: Scottish Granite Cutters and the Texas Capitol Boycott," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 95 (April 1992): 465-86; Marjory Harper, "Aristocratic Adventures: British Gentlemen Emigrants and the North American Frontier, ca. 1880-1920," *Journal of the West*, 32 (April 1997): 41-51; Marjory Harper and Michael Vance, eds., *Myth, Migration and the Making of Memory: Scotia and Nova Scotia, c. 1700-1990* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1999); Marjory Harper, *Emigration from Scotland between the Wars: Opportunity or Exile?* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998). Regrettably, this book only deals with the United States in passing (see, in particular, 142-46). In a more recent contribution, Harper analyses the Scots as "global wanderers" in the nineteenth-century, occasionally touching on the 1900-1914 period, paying special attention to their movement to British North America. The exodus to the United States is included into the author's analysis, along with migration to more distant places such as Australia, New Zealand, India and South Africa. Cf. Marjory Harper. *Adventurers and Exile. The Great Scottish Exodus* (London: Profile Books, 2003).

<sup>31</sup> See Thomas M. Devine, *To the Ends of the Earth* (London: Allen Lane, 2011) Marjory Harper and Stephen Constantine, *Migration and Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Tanja Bueltmann, *Scottish Ethnicity and the Making of New Zealand Society, 1850 to 1930* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011); Angela McCarthy, *Scottishness and Irishness in New Zealand since 1840* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011).

emigration concern Canada and other British Dominions. Regrettably, the study of Scottish emigration to the United States in the first thirty years of the twentieth century is still in its infancy, differing but little from the state of research on the English and Welsh diaspora to America in the same period.

There are signs of a possible reversal of previous trends, though. In fact, quite recently a handful of essays providing much-needed analysis of some key aspects of Scottish emigration to the United States in the inter-war period have been published by Nicholas Evans, Marjory Harper and Angela McCarthy,<sup>32</sup> adding a few significant contributions to the still disappointingly small number of studies on British emigration to America in this period.<sup>33</sup> What makes these essays particularly welcome is the fact that they are *exclusively* devoted to the twentieth-century British emigration to the USA, in particular to its pre-World War II period. In this connection, mention must also be made of Steve Babson's 1990-1991 scholarly analysis of British and Irish skilled workers in the Detroit auto industry,<sup>34</sup> while the only attempt at providing an overview of post-1900 British emigration to the U.S. remains a less than satisfactory book by Kenneth Lines written in 1978, which makes the writing of a general work on this period all the more needed.<sup>35</sup>

Finally, it is worth emphasizing that renewed impetus to research in the field of emigration has been given by the establishment, in 2008, of the Scottish Centre for Diaspora Studies at the University of Edinburgh. This promotes historical enquiry into the subject of Scottish mobility across the centuries on a global stage, though not

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<sup>32</sup> Nicholas Evans, "The Emigration of Skilled Male Workers from Clydeside during the Interwar Period," *International Journal of Maritime History* 18, 1 (2006): 255-280; Nicholas Evans, and Marjory Harper, "Socio-Economic Dislocation and Inter-War Emigration to Canada and the United States: A Scottish Snapshot," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* (Great Britain) 34, 4 (2006): 529-552; McCarthy, "Ethnic Networks and Identities Among Inter-war Scottish Migrants in North America"; McCarthy, *Personal Narratives of Irish and Scottish Migration*. Though spanning a longer period of time, the sources on the Scots' American experience McCarthy uses in her monograph are the same she exploits in her previous article.

<sup>33</sup> Some of the most relevant contributions on British emigration to the USA which, judging from the chronological span specified in their title, could be expected to cover the history of the first decades of the twentieth century at some length are in reality focussed on the nineteenth century, especially its second half. This is the case with Berthoff's and Yearley's above-cited monographs. Other works venture beyond the dawn of the twentieth century or do more than just touch upon the post-1900 period, but do not have the British exodus of the first three decades of the twentieth-century as their focal point. In addition to John Laslett's already-mentioned study on immigrant Scottish miners cf. Jones, *Wales in America*; Ewart, *Cornish Mining Families*; Patrick J. Blessing. *The British and Irish in Oklahoma* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980).

<sup>34</sup> Babson, "British and Irish Militants"; Babson, *Building the Union*.

<sup>35</sup> Lines, *British and Canadian Immigration to the United States since 1920*.

limiting its activity to Scotland's diaspora.<sup>36</sup> There is grounds for hope, therefore, that further investigation into the mass of people who left Great Britain in the first three decades of the twentieth century to start a new life in America will be conducted in the future.

Indeed, one of the main objectives of this work is to contribute filling the wide gap of knowledge about Britons' experience in America in the twentieth century, particularly between 1900 and the outbreak of World War II. Both the Ellis Island and the FWP oral histories shed light on this period. The Ellis Island oral histories focus on the first three decades of the twentieth century, especially the 1910s and 1920s, while very briefly dealing with the post-1945 era in the concluding section devoted to the summary description of the informants' course of life. Unfortunately, as we shall see in detail in Chapter 5, the emigrants' experience in the Great Depression is only occasionally touched upon in this body of sources.

Things are more complicated with regard to the FWP interviews. Out of the 34 "core" informants whose date of landing in the United States is specified (in 11 life histories there is no indication as to the year of arrival) 16 reached America in the 1870s and 1880s. Of the other FWP informants who emigrated in the nineteenth century, one arrived in the 1860s and one in the 1890s, while four left their native country in the period preceding the outbreak of the Civil War (three crossed the ocean in the 1850s, one in 1848; it was indeed beginning to be difficult to find people who had emigrated before the Civil War still alive in the late 1930s).

The FWP informants who arrived in the nineteenth century talk about their experiences in the (more or less extended) period following their admission into the United States, yet they also often discuss aspects of their life in the post-1900 decades. They may, for example, express their opinion about New Deal policies and dwell upon the hard times they were going through at the moment of interview. Besides, information on crucial aspects of British immigrants' life in the United States in the 1930s and the previous decades, such as their jobs, economic conditions or the retention or original cultural traits, is at times provided by the fieldworkers in their descriptive introductions to the interviews (which unfortunately are present in only some of the

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<sup>36</sup> Among the recent publications authored or edited by members of the Centre cf. the above-mentioned latest survey of Scottish emigration from 1750 to the present by Thomas M. Devine, the Director of the Centre; Thomas M. Devine and David Hesse, eds., *Scotland and Poland: Historical Encounters 1500-2010* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 2011); Mario Varricchio, ed., *Back to Caledonia. Scottish Return Migration from the 16<sup>th</sup> Century to the Present* (Edinburgh: John Donald, forthcoming).

accounts examined here). Above all, a sizeable number of the FWP informants (namely, 12) emigrated in the twentieth century, and thus their accounts deal with the same period covered by the Ellis Island interviews. Finally, the FWP “other interviews” cover nineteenth as well as twentieth century aspects of British immigrants’ migratory experience.

Not only are there similarities and differences in the two collections of sources concerning the historical period upon which they focus, but also with regard to the subjects discussed in the narratives and the weight specific topics are given in them. Actually, as we shall see later on, while in some cases the FWP and Ellis Island oral histories deal with similar issues and facets of British emigration to the U.S., in others they appear to be complementary. In sum, by combining the analysis of the FWP and Ellis Island testimonies it is possible to investigate a number of significant features of Britons’ experience in America over a span of almost a century. In particular, though to a different degree, both corpora of interviews provide precious documentation which allows scholars to draw attention to the first three decades of the twentieth century and the Great Depression, the “neglected time” of Britons’ emigration to the United States.

### **III. Structure**

Apart from the Introduction – which presents the subject, scope, objectives and structure of the work, also providing a brief overview of the historiography in the field – and the Epilogue – which summarizes the conclusions reached in the study and offers further reflections on the experience of British immigrants to the U.S. – this work has been divided into six chapters. The first two tackle key theoretical issues connected to the nature of the sources and offer a critical analysis of the FWP and Ellis Island oral history programmes. More precisely, Chapter 1 has been devoted to a thorough discussion of important epistemological characteristics of oral sources, of their peculiarity and reliability. This has not been done in a justificatory way, to somehow excuse the writer for not having exploited more traditional written, preferably archival, material. Indeed, as in all historical work, it has seemed fitting to highlight the epistemological specificity of the documents utilized, i.e. the kind of analysis they enable scholars to carry out and the conclusions they allow them to reach. Chapter 2 discusses the social and cultural framework within which the Federal Writers Project

and Ellis Island ventures developed, providing an in-depth examination of the strengths and limits of the sources on which the dissertation's conclusions are based. In particular, it dwells upon the objectives of the oral history programmes, the interview guidelines that were adopted, the approach of the fieldworkers and the textual characteristics of the interviews, and deals with the scholarly contributions drawing on these accounts.

The following four chapters trace the experiences of men and women who left Great Britain for the U.S. by dwelling upon the pre-emigration, emigration proper and post-emigration phases. In discussing Britons' migratory venture attention will be drawn to similarities in the informants' experiences and differences due to their age, gender and nationality, as well as to elements of the emigration process that are idiosyncratic or only shared by a minority of the interviewees.

Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 focus on the pre-migration phase and the emigrants' journey overseas and passage through American Golden Door respectively, while the following two sections focus upon life in the United States. The analysis of the post-emigration phase foregrounds Britons' economic conditions, work activity and social mobility in America (Chapter 5), as well as issues of identity, belonging and cultural retention (Chapter 6). In particular, the last two chapters of the thesis put to the test the widespread notions of British immigrants' economic success and cultural "invisibility" in America. In fact, as we shall see, the evidence offered by the Ellis Island and Federal Writers' Project oral histories challenge the image of Britons as mobile and successful immigrants who blended into American society relatively quickly and easily.

Needless to say, the analysis of the primary sources will be contextualized by drawing upon extensive secondary literature, especially but not exclusively covering the British diaspora to the U.S. in the period under consideration. This will provide a broader cultural and historical background against which to place the information supplied by the FWP and Ellis Island interviews, and will make it possible to notice discrepancies between the portrait of British emigration emerging from them and the one delineated by scholars so far.

Appended at the end of the work the reader will find the informants' essential biographical details as well as the question list followed by the Ellis Island historians and the national interview guidelines created by the Folklore and Social Ethnic Studies Units of the Federal Writers Project.

Lastly, it is worth emphasizing that the portrait of the British diasporic experience presented in this work will not unfold just, or mainly, through the words of the

emigrants themselves, nor will it conceal their voices. It will be an account constructed *on* and *with* the words uttered by the emigrants. The choice has been made, therefore, to fruitfully combine critical analysis with the informants' narration. Following a long-established academic tradition, numerous, and sometimes extensive, quotations from the interviews have been inserted into the critical discourse to allow readers to hear the voices of the protagonists of migration and provide a backdrop against which to check the validity of the historian's statements. Furthermore, numerous excerpts taken from the interviews have been used to introduce the main subjects discussed in each of the chapters devoted to the analysis of Britons' migratory experience. In fact, reproducing at length the words of oral accounts establishes a dialogic space between the meaning conveyed by the sources, the interpretation of the historian and the interpretation of the readers.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, the quotations included in the analytical chapters will reveal the interviewees' capabilities as tellers of their own story and convey the vividness and punch of the spoken word.

Of course, there is no "correct" method of presentation of the informants' words, and ultimately the choice depends on the objectives of the historian and the effect he/she wants to produce on the reader. Yet a few observations on this point can be made. While by keeping quotations down to a minimum scholars superimpose their own voice on all others, as if it were the only legitimate one, by only using montage they give up the possibility of intersecting voices and perspectives located on different interpretive planes.<sup>38</sup> A work can also present both the critical discourse and the informants' words without necessarily interweaving them. In fact, the historian's and the speaker's perspectives may be kept separate though dialoguing with each other: this is what happens, for instance, when the informants' words are quoted in separate sections of a book preceded by explanatory headnotes. Such methods of presentation certainly enable the reader to access more readily the voices of the interviewees, but are far from merely "reproducing" them. Actually, the conceptual framework provided by the historian and the montage of the testimonies both explicitly and implicitly suggest an angle of interpretation of the documents. What they certainly lose is the opportunity to establish

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<sup>37</sup> Alessandro Portelli, "Tryin' to Gather a Little Knowledge. Some Thoughts on the Ethics of Oral History," in Id., *The Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 65.

<sup>38</sup> It is true, though, that scholars who use montage can create a polyphonic discourse by wisely intertwining the informants' voices.



a continuous dialogic interchange between the historian's and the informants' words, which is made possible only by the juxtaposition of their voices.

A final technical note: the passages from the Ellis Island testimonies are taken from the transcripts produced by the staff of the Ellis Island Oral History Office (only a few of the interviews with British immigrants have not been transcribed yet). Page references throughout the work are, therefore, to the FWP life histories typescripts and the Ellis Island transcriptions. All interviews have been quoted with only minimal editorial intervention, limited to correcting typos and improving punctuation where this facilitates reading. For the sake of brevity, footnotes only specify the name of the informant and the corpus to which the oral histories belong – the abbreviations EI and FWP have been used for the Ellis Island and Federal Writers' Project interviews respectively – while full bibliographical information is provided at the end of the thesis.

## CHAPTER 1

### *Oral narratives as history*

It is hard to separate things once you have woven them together in memory. They seem a record of what happened, but memory is the shifting record of the sense we make of things.

We alter stories. We drop some altogether, and we add others. Who is to know? We often do not know ourselves. We change, our stories change.

But our stories make a claim on the past. This is how it happened, they say. It is an unexamined claim; it is a dangerous claim. Our stories are vessels that float on the seas of the past; there are things out there that can sink or redirect them, for the past is full of dead things preserved on paper or in the land itself but unremembered by any living person.

Memory is a living thing vulnerable to this dead past until memory itself dies with its creator. We can record memories, but then they are fixed on the page, pinned like insects in a collection, bodies of what was alive. We can pass memories on, but then they become someone else's memories, they live on like children. [...]

History is a dead thing brought to new life. It is fragments of a past, dead and gone, resurrected by historians. It is in this sense like Frankenstein's monster. It threatens our versions of ourselves.<sup>1</sup>

Through oral history interviews, working-class men and women, indigenous peoples or members of cultural minorities, amongst others, have inscribed their experience on the historical record, and offered their own interpretations of history.<sup>2</sup>

#### **I. Entrenched prejudice**

Incredible though it may seem, as John Tosh remarks in the revised 2002 edition of his acclaimed historiographical overview, '[e]ven today the mainstream of the historical profession remains sceptical and is often not prepared to enter into discussion about the actual merits and drawbacks of oral research.'<sup>3</sup> In many cases, rather than utterly reject the methods of oral history, historians tend to "cut it down to size", to lay emphasis on its peculiar traits in order to restrict its domain of application and thwart its potentialities. Thus, oral history is often deemed to be history's handmaiden, a method which basically provides supplementary evidence, needs to be used to fill the gaps of documentary sources, covers specific (and limited) areas of historical knowledge or, sometimes, only adds colour and vividness to otherwise dull historical accounts.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard White, *Remembering Ahanagan. Storytelling in a Family's Past* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1999), 17-18.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, "Introduction," in *The Oral History Reader*, eds. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (London: Routledge, 1998), ix.

<sup>3</sup> John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History: Aims, Methods, and New Directions in the Study of Modern History* (London: Longman, 2002), 296.

Undeniably, oral history sometimes play an ancillary role in the field of historical research, as when it permits historians to compensate for the lack of written sources. Yet it can do much more than that, as the soundest contributions based on this type of documentation clearly demonstrate. To begin with, it is capable of opening up novel areas of enquiry. Indeed, certain aspects of historical reality can normally be investigated only through oral history. As Paul Thompson points out, '[w]ithout its evidence, the historian can discover very little indeed about either the ordinary family's contacts with neighbours and kin, or its internal relationships. The roles of husband and wife, the upbringing of girls and boys, emotional and material conflicts and dependence, the struggle of youth for independence, courtship, sexual behaviour within and outside marriage, contraception and abortion – all these were effectively secret areas.' And again: '[i]n the field of family history, for example, internal patterns of behaviour and relationships are generally inaccessible without oral evidence. The same is often true, in studying a strike, of the details of informal local organization, or of deviant behaviour such as blacklegging, or the normal devices like stealing fuel which helped families to survive with no income.'<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, oral history can throw new light on topics already studied with different critical tools, and it can stimulate the investigation of subjects which have been neglected despite the availability of traditional documents. Above all, as we shall see below, it offers the possibility of investigating historical reality from a unique angle of vision.

The deeply-rooted mistrust of oral history as a completely independent method of historical analysis is also revealed by the assertions of some oral historians themselves, who urge scholars to double-check the information gathered from interviews and combine the use of oral accounts with other kinds of documentation, emphasizing the benefit of exploiting a variety of sources in serious historical work. There is nothing wrong with that, of course. However, one does not usually find the same note of caution sounded on works exclusively based on archival or more generally written documents (needless to say, provided interviews are available or could be produced). My contention is that it is perfectly legitimate to base historical research solely on oral sources just as it is to employ only written material, taking for granted that any kind of historical evidence requires critical evaluation and benefits from comparison with information gathered from different documents. Actually, what is really worth calling

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<sup>4</sup> Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 3<sup>rd</sup> revised edition, 2000), 8, 154.

attention to is the aspects of historical reality and historical experience that can be unveiled by using a specific kind of documentation. That is why it appears to be fitting here to thoroughly discuss the distinctive epistemological characteristics of oral narratives. From what has been said, it will not perhaps be pointless also to touch upon the age-old “objectivity/subjectivity” debate, the elusive nature of historical “facts” and the inescapable limits of historical reconstruction.

A final preliminary remark: some of the characteristics of oral histories which will be highlighted below are shared by other kinds of first-hand accounts, particularly autobiographies (this is the case, for instance, with the manifestation of personal feelings, or the mingling of past and present perspectives in the description of a given event), while others are unique to oral narratives. In fact, the latter’s “conversational” nature, on which we shall dwell upon below, separates them out from autobiographies in many ways: the interweaving of two different perspectives and agendas, that of the interviewer and that of the interviewee, or the possibility the interviewer has of challenging the narrator’s version of events, for example, are distinctive features of oral histories. Furthermore, first-hand written accounts such as memoirs or autobiographies are much more “controlled” genres of discourse than oral histories. Unlike interviewees, in fact, the authors of autobiographies and memoirs can generally revise the text at will, adding or cutting passages and making stylistic improvements; again, with them rests the final responsibility of what the reader will find on the written page, while in a conversational narrative the authority is shared. There is no space here for a detailed discussion of the similarities and dissimilarities between oral histories and autobiographies (or letters and diaries). What is relevant for our purpose is to draw attention to the key characteristics of oral histories rather than distinguish the traits which are peculiar to them from those which are not.

## **II. Lingering doubts**

Scholars who challenge the validity of oral history often contrast “objective” with “subjective” sources, and typically consider written documents as providing “objective” information while regarding oral histories as “subjective” narratives. By this they intend idiosyncratic, partial and often unreliable accounts of events and situations. Before proceeding any further it is necessary to make it clear that, as normally employed by

oral historians, the term “subjectivity” is not the opposite of “objectivity” or “facticity”. Actually, it is the rough equivalent of “individual”, “personal”, and it is used to refer to the feelings of the narrators, the emotional impact events have on their lives and their interpretation of such events.

The fundamental objections made against oral sources rest on the sacredness of the written word and the conviction that, through the skilful interpretation of proper documents, scholars can delineate historical “reality”. However, the critique of the notions of “document” and “historical fact” conducted by post-1945 historiography has fundamentally contributed to the questioning of a possible objectivity of historical reconstruction and has therefore blurred the distinction between written and oral sources. As early as 1961 Edward H. Carr<sup>5</sup> showed that historical documentation becomes meaningful only when it is selected and organized, and demonstrated ‘the mythical character of the historical fact and the impossibility of producing a comprehensive factual and neutral account of any set of events.’<sup>6</sup> Documents, it has been understood, are not “innocent” source material; they inevitably incorporate the power relationships in force within the societies that create them,<sup>7</sup> and are also a product of the societies that use and interpret them. In fact, they offer a support for the *construction*, rather than the reconstruction, of history.

Oral history itself has played an important role in questioning the idea of a possible objectivity of historical documents, in debunking the myth of factual truth and the very category of historical “fact”. Truly, oral history makes the activity of researchers in determining the nature and meaning of their sources all the more evident, thus rendering it impossible to assert the objective character of the events described by the historian.<sup>8</sup>

The diffusion of oral history has undoubtedly been helped by the fortunes of post-structuralist theory. Actually, one of the legitimate claims of post-structuralism is that, by challenging the credibility and epistemological basis of official discourse, it permits marginalized voices to be heard and valorized. The impact of post-structuralist theory has contributed to the widening of the field of historiographical work mainly in three directions:

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<sup>5</sup> Edward H. Carr, *What is History?* (London: Macmillan, 1961).

<sup>6</sup> Willie Thompson, *What Happened to History?* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), 34.

<sup>7</sup> Jacques Le Goff, *History and Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992, 1977c), xvii.

<sup>8</sup> Luisa Passerini, *Storia e soggettività. Le fonti orali, la memoria* (Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1988), 43.

The first of these is the rescue from oblivion of ignored or historically despised groups [...] linked to, though not identical with the second, the examination of how identities – social, cultural, personal or otherwise – are constructed and constituted, both intrinsically and in opposition to outsiders. [...] The third is the exploitation not of how situations and events develop or are structured, but how they are understood and represented.<sup>9</sup>

Laying emphasis on the process of construction of history and on the ideological character of all narratives does not entail embracing total relativism and refuting the very existence of a reality. The “textualist” version of post-structuralist theory – which denies the validity and verifiability of any possible interpretation of reality, establishes the equal legitimacy of all readings of the same documentary material, and compares the work of a historian to that of a fiction writer – is untenable. In fact, if history

is to be distinguished ontologically from myth or fiction certain presumptions are necessary, the main one being that it is possible in principle to reconstruct, via representation, a no-longer-present reality so that it can be understood in terms not essentially different from the understanding of any segment of contemporary reality, physical or human. If the very possibility of such understanding is denied, no further discussion is really possible.<sup>10</sup>

Alessandro Portelli pinpoints the relationship between oral history and “truth”, also making it clear that debunking the myth of factual objectivity does not involve abandoning a scientific approach to scholarly research. His argument can be applied to all kind of historical work:

one of the reasons why oral history has been sometimes less than welcome in some circles is that it has disarranged many accepted truths. [...] Rather than replacing previous truths with alternative ones [...] oral history has made us uncomfortably aware of the elusive quality of historical truth itself. Yet, an

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<sup>9</sup> Thompson, *What Happened to History?*, 181-82.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 108. Scholars who reject the absolute relativism of the textualist position deem it possible to tackle the intrinsically ambiguous character of documents and the inevitable partiality of historical reconstruction ‘by careful interpretations, criticisms and comparisons and recognition in every case of where the boundaries of evidence permit no reliable conclusions to be drawn. The process in principle is an endless one, which is not the same thing as saying that no true historical knowledge is possible.’ Ibid., 111. Even though of the same event a potentially very high number of versions exists, such versions cannot be arbitrary or inconsistent. Actually, ‘[a] central commitment of historical research is to *exclude* certain interpretations or narratives as inconsistent with the evidence available.’ Ibid, 118. Fredric Jameson lays stress on the character of “absence” of history, on the fact that history can only be grasped through its effects. However, he observes that acknowledging the textualization of history does not mean admitting its “textuality” and opposes the ‘host of contemporary post-structuralisms and post-Marxisms, for which History, in the bad sense – the reference to a “context” or a “ground”, an external real world of some kind, the reference, in other words, to the much maligned “referent” itself – is simply one more text among others, something found in history manuals [...]’ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious. Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Routledge, 1989, 1981c.), 35. The referent does not disappear just because it is experienced through texts: history is not a text, though it is accessible only in textual form and our approach to reality is necessarily mediated through prior textualization. Ibid., 35.

aspiration toward ‘reality’, ‘fact’, and ‘truth’ is essential to our work: though we know that certainty is bound to escape us, the search provides focus, shape, and purpose to everything we do.<sup>11</sup>

The foregoing shows that the most serious criticism levelled at the practice of oral history can be radically challenged.

Traditional scepticism about oral sources can also be rejected by pointing out that these can be more, rather than less, “objective” than written documents. In fact, a face-to-face conversation allows for straight probing in a way that is not possible with traditional documentary sources; furthermore, unlike the equal inevitable “subjectivity” of written documents, the personal bias of oral expression is explicit, and thus can be taken into account in historical interpretation.<sup>12</sup> Another compelling argument that can be advanced to dispute the supposed “inadequacy” of oral sources is the fact that many written documents traditionalist scholars have no qualms about using – parliamentary papers, meeting minutes, published interviews, trial testimonies etc. – are indeed transcriptions of spoken testimonies or conversations.<sup>13</sup>

According to its detractors, one of the most serious flaws of oral history is that the testimonies are distant from events, and thus subject to the distortion of a necessarily faulty memory. Yet the temporal distance that separates the accounts from the narrated events does not make oral sources less reliable than written documents. Indeed, the question of temporal distance also needs to be taken into account for the majority of written documents, as they are usually penned some time after the event they describe. Actually, ‘[w]hile written memoirs of politicians or labor leaders are usually credited until proven to be in error, they are as distant from some aspects of the event which they

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<sup>11</sup> Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories, Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991), viii-xix.

<sup>12</sup> Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Traditions and the Verbal Arts. A Guide to Research Practices* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 48.

<sup>13</sup> John Tosh points out that the prejudice of traditionalist scholars against oral histories is also based on their *hindsight* character and the activity of *production* of new evidence undertaken by oral historians, which distinguish oral histories from the written sources that were oral in origin: ‘[i]ronically, many of the written sources cited by today’s historians were themselves oral in origin. Medieval chroniclers such as William of Malmesbury in the twelfth century incorporated oral traditions as well as first-hand testimonies into their writings. Social surveys and official commissions of enquiry, which loom so large in the primary sources for nineteenth-century social history, are full of summarized testimonies which historians draw on, often with little regard for the selection of witnesses or the circumstances in which they were interviewed. Yet the idea that historians might add to the volume of available oral evidence by conducting interviews themselves continue to arouse misgivings. The reason is partly that historians are reluctant to see any compromise with the principle that contemporaneity is the prime requirement of historical sources – and oral sources have an inescapable element of hindsight about them. But perhaps there is a more deep-seated aversion to any radical change in the habits of work required for historical research, and a reluctance to grapple with the implications of scholars sharing in the creation (and not just the interpretation) of new evidence.’ Tosh, *The Pursuit of History*, 296-97.

relate as are many oral history interviews, and only hide their dependence on time by assuming the immutable form of a “text”.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, oral sources ‘might compensate chronological distance with a much closer personal involvement.’<sup>15</sup>

At any rate, discrediting oral history on the grounds of the deceptiveness of memory is pointless, since what really counts is conceptualization, which undermines all kinds of historical documents.<sup>16</sup> Besides, the problem of memory loss is less serious than it is often believed.<sup>17</sup> Temporal distance may even constitute an advantage for historical reconstruction, since ‘[m]any social pressures against openness diminish in retrospect, and the last years of life for many people are a time of reflection and special candour.’<sup>18</sup>

Furthermore, the more discerning historiography values oral sources also, or even above all, because they elaborate the meaning of events through the workings of memory and the filter of language.<sup>19</sup> Actually, as we shall see below, their interest also rests in their divergence from facts; in other words, the “unreliability” of oral sources poses a problem of historiographical interpretation, namely the reasons for the narrators’ “mistakes”. As Paul Thompson observes, it is indubitable that memory ‘brings many traps for the unwary, which often explains the cynicism of those less well informed about oral sources. Yet they also bring unexpected rewards to a historian who is prepared to appreciate the complexity with which reality and myth, “objective” and “subjective”, are inextricably mixed in all human perception of the world, both individual and collective.’<sup>20</sup>

The meaningful workings of memory is just one of the characteristics of oral history that make it a unique practice for the production of original evidence and a very special tool to investigate historical reality. In the following pages attention will be directed to the political and epistemological essence of this research approach, the benefits scholars can derive from exploiting interviews in their work and the kind of analysis these

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<sup>14</sup> Alessandro Portelli, “What Makes Oral History Different?” in Id., *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories*, 52.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Paul Thompson, “Storia orale e storia della classe operaia,” *Quaderni storici* 35 (1977 maggio-agosto): 410.

<sup>17</sup> ‘Memory loss is in fact concentrated during and immediately after the perception of an event. There are numerous old people who retain a remarkably full and accurate memory of their early years.’ Paul Thompson, *The Edwardians: The Remaking of British Society* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1975), 6.

<sup>18</sup> Thompson, *The Edwardians*, 6.

<sup>19</sup> Alessandro Portelli, “Un lavoro di relazione. Osservazioni sulla storia orale,” in <http://libur.tripod.com/Portelli2.htm>, paper presented at the seminar on fieldwork and oral sources held at the Libera Università di Roma, December 2000, 3.

<sup>20</sup> Thompson, *The Voice of the Past*, 156-57.



sources enable researchers to carry out. The arguments advanced will further counter the criticisms commonly directed at oral history.

### III. Living history

From the start – with the notable exception of the Columbia University Oral History Project in the first years of its existence<sup>21</sup> – oral history has represented a more democratic and participatory approach to the reconstruction of the past. In fact, it has opposed official historiography with regard to both the topics treated, especially at the beginning, and the role given to ordinary people in the *production* of historical knowledge.<sup>22</sup> In a nutshell, as it has often been repeated, usually with rhetorical emphasis, oral history enables the voice of the marginalized, the hidden from history – such as farm and factory labourers, the aged, men and women with disabilities, the members of ethnic or religious minorities – to be heard.<sup>23</sup> This is undoubtedly one of the main reasons why oral historians generally quote the interviewees' words at length in their works. It is little wonder, therefore, that the experience of immigrants have traditionally also been investigated through the collection and analysis of oral narratives.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, oral history is a fundamental instrument for investigating the

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<sup>21</sup> From 1948, when the project started, until the early 1960s the New York Columbia University researchers interviewed individuals that were thought to have lived a particularly “significant” life – mainly “illustrious” men that (had) held important public positions, often in the fields of politics and business. Later on the Columbia centre embraced a new ethos, and began recording the life of members of marginalized groups and ordinary Americans.

<sup>22</sup> The egalitarian facets of the practice of oral history are manifold. As Paul Thompson points out, for instance, ‘by introducing new evidence from the underside, by shifting the focus and opening new areas of inquiry, by challenging some of the assumptions and accepted judgements of historians, by bringing recognition to substantial groups of people who had been ignored, a cumulative process of transformation is set in motion. The scope of historical writing itself is enlarged and enriched; and at the same time its social message changes. History becomes, to put it simply, more democratic.’ Thompson, *The Voice of the Past*, 8-9.

<sup>23</sup> This does not mean that oral history is necessarily an instrument for social progress. Examples of a conservative use of oral history are provided by programs that only or principally collect the voices of public figures – as was the case with the aforementioned Columbia Oral History Project in its early period of existence – and by studies that adopt a celebratory stance towards prominent men. Of course, to give voice to ordinary folk does not necessarily translate into the production of narratives informed by what is commonly understood as a progressive or leftist political stance. Indeed, this is not the case with the Ellis Island interviews, as we shall see below. It is the use to which oral history is put that proves to be crucial, not the mere recoding of people's words.

<sup>24</sup> A few examples of important monographs on the subject of migration that exploit oral histories will suffice to prove the point. They range from general works to researches on specific ethnic groups, from studies exploring immigrant women's experience to books spanning the life of more than one generation of ethnic citizens. John Bodnar draws on oral sources in his well-known synthesis of immigration and ethnic history – *The Transplanted: A History of Immigrants in Urban America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985). Another classic of the field is Eva Morawska's *For Bread With Butter: Life-*

migratory experience, which the present work fully exploits. As James A. Hammerton and Alistair Thompson put it,

[t]he intimate detail of an extended life history reveals important aspects of migration history, like the interplay between family members as they consider emigration and then confront the challenges of the new world. Within each migrant life story we can see how different socio-economic factors influence migration and can better understand, for example, connections between employment, housing and family status. Personal testimony is also an essential source for exploring how the knowledge, feelings, fantasies, hopes and dreams of individuals, families and communities [...] inform and shape the migration experience at every stage and are in turn transformed by that experience.<sup>25</sup>

Oral history offers common individuals a twofold opportunity to speak, since they convey their own experience preferably and in a more articulate way through spoken words. Indeed, one of the most important reasons why oral narratives are essential for telling the history of the underprivileged is that their members (the majority of whom have a working class background) often lack the opportunity, time or ability to record their experiences in writing.<sup>26</sup> Actually, the collection of oral sources is an indispensable, though not a sufficient, condition to shed light on the history of non-hegemonic groups, whereas it is obviously less important for telling the history of the ruling classes, since they have access to a variety of means of communication and leave behind a large amount of written documents.<sup>27</sup>

Affirming that oral history enables the voice of the marginalized and underprivileged to be heard does not imply believing that what emerges in the interview is the informant's straightforward, unmediated version of events. In fact, many contextual elements affect the production of the narrative, the most important being the interaction between speaker and interviewer. Furthermore, the inescapable influence of dominant political and cultural forces always need to be taken into account, the more so when examining the vision of reality held by members of non-hegemonic groups. The

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*Worlds of East Central Europeans in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, 1890-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), which taps more than 200 interviews with first and second-generation immigrants. Elizabeth Ewen's *Immigrant Women in the Land of Dollars: Life and Culture on the Lower East Side, 1890-1925* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1985) provides a further example of a valuable monograph on the theme of immigration making extensive use of interviews (specifically, with Italian and Jewish women and their daughters). Recent groundbreaking research is to be found in Kathy Burrell's *Moving Lives: Narratives of Nation and Migration among Europeans in Post-War Britain* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006) and Kathy Burrell and Panikos Panayi, eds., *Histories and Memories: Migrants and Their History in Britain* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 2006).

<sup>25</sup> A. James Hammerton and Alistair Thomson, *Ten Pound Poms. Australia's Invisible Immigrants* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2005), 16-17.

<sup>26</sup> Laurie R. Serikaku, "Oral History in Ethnic Communities: Widening the Focus," *Oral History Review* 17/1 (1989 Spring): 71.

<sup>27</sup> Portelli, "What Makes Oral History Different?" 56.

spontaneous expression of a genuinely oppositional, or at least “other”, worldview on the part of marginalized people is only a myth.

In spite of all this, through oral history the point of view of the underprivileged, their version of reality, no matter how filtered, come to play a crucial role in the construction and interpretation of events. As a rule, the history of the underprivileged was formerly written by members of cultural and social elites who relied on official documents that did not include the perspective of the subjects under scrutiny. Oral history, then, balances the picture and in this sense, indeed, allows the voice of the excluded from history to come to the foreground.

With regard to the interaction between interviewer and interviewee, it is worth remembering that oral histories are often called “personal narratives”, “personal testimonies” and the like, and are sometimes implicitly equated to other documents focussed on individual experiences, such as autobiographies or memoirs. In this case, language usage may give the wrong impression that oral histories offer an account of people’s life and historical events that fully conveys the individual’s point of view. In reality,

the control of historical discourse remains firmly in the hands of the historian. It is the historian who selects the people who will be interviewed; who contributes to the shaping of the testimony by asking the questions and reacting to the answers; and who gives the testimony its final published shape and context (if only in terms of montage and transcription). Even accepting that the working class speaks through oral history, it is clear that the class does not speak in abstract, but speaks *to* the historian, *with* the historian and, inasmuch as the material is published, *through* the historian.<sup>28</sup>

In fact, the encounter between interviewer and interviewee generates a two-directional communication flow. Oral sources are not *collected* by the historian but *constructed* in his presence and with his participation. The “raw” material of historical analysis, therefore, is already a product of interference.<sup>29</sup> Inevitably, then, the form and substance of the reminiscences examined in this work have been affected by the individuals who gathered them, i.e. the Ellis Island and FWP fieldworkers, and by the relationships they established with the informants (as we shall see in the next chapter, this is much more the case with the Ellis Island interviews). Indeed, even in free-flowing conversations informants are influenced by what they have been told prior to the interview and by the researchers’ attitude in the course of it. Moreover, an utterly

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Portelli, “Un lavoro di relazione. Osservazioni sulla storia orale,” 5-6.

silent interviewer is only a fiction: 'it is questionable whether a fully subjective narrative interview could exist. In order to start at all, a social context must be set up, the purpose of recording explained, and at least an initial question asked; and all these, along with unspoken assumptions, create expectations which shape what follows.'<sup>30</sup> For these and other reasons the interview does not cease to be a partnership, even in its "freest" forms, while it is considerably influenced by the interviewer in its more structured forms.

Owing to the active role played by the historian, rather than a *personal* narrative the interview 'can only be described as a *conversational* narrative: conversational because of the relationship of interviewer and interviewee, and narrative because of the form of exposition – the telling of a tale.'<sup>31</sup> While the expression "personal narrative" can therefore assume an ambiguous meaning when relating to oral histories, due to the connotation of the adjective "personal",<sup>32</sup> a phrase such as "first-person narrative" is less problematic, as it refers more to the linguistic mode of expression (the use of the first-person pronoun) than to the content of the narration itself, and equally acceptable is the use of "first-hand" as a qualifier of terms such as "narrative" or "account".

Oral narratives enable the researcher to examine the attitudes and emotional reactions of individuals towards specific events, and in general their "culture"; they reveal the opinions, the fears and the desires of the speakers, tell us about the meaning they attached to events and circumstances, provide information on what people have done but also on what they wanted to do, believed they were doing or believe they have done.<sup>33</sup>

Oral history also gives researchers the opportunity to shed light on the inaccuracies and "inventions" in the speakers' version of events. In this connection, it is worth underlining that oral historians have learnt to consider the "failings" of memory as a strength rather than a weakness, since these reveal important aspects of the informants'

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<sup>30</sup> Thompson, *The Voice of the Past*, 228. Even though the interviewer may try 'to be objective and unobtrusive, he must inevitably play a dynamic role in the creation of the interview record, and the way he plays his role often determines not only the tone and character of the record produced but also the substance of the record content. Narrators frequently respond with what they think the interviewer wants to hear.' William Moss, "Oral History: An Appreciation," in *Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*, ed. Willa K. Baum and David Dunaway (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1984), 97.

<sup>31</sup> Ronald Grele, "Movement Without Aim: Methodological and Theoretical Problems In Oral History," in *The Oral History Reader*, edited by Perks and Thomson, 44, emphasis added.

<sup>32</sup> Actually, it is worth remembering that the phrase "personal narrative" is also commonly used by scholars who are perfectly aware of the dialogical character of the oral source – "conversational narrative" has just not taken root.

<sup>33</sup> Portelli, "What Makes Oral History Different?" 50.

worldview. Actually, the interest of oral testimonies also consists in their divergence from facts – i.e. from elements of factual truth upon which general consensus among historians exist, such as the precise date, duration and chronological sequence of events –, since the gap separating facts from fictions is filled by desire, the imaginary and the symbolic.<sup>34</sup> Obviously, discrepancies between accounts and reality are also found in written sources; yet, predictably, oral narratives tend to be wrong on specific elements of factual truth more often than written sources.<sup>35</sup> When they are, and when the analysis of a large enough sample of interviews does not clarify the issue under consideration, researchers will of course have to rely on information provided by other documents.

Oral history offers a unique access to people's ordinary life and their inner thoughts, to their familial and interpersonal relationships, but it does not ignore work relations or political ideology, nor the collective dimension in general. Actually, from cumulative individual experiences it is possible to infer the behavioural patterns and beliefs of a social group.<sup>36</sup> It will then be the task of the historian to distinguish, wherever possible, idiosyncrasies from shared traits. In particular, as we have already pointed out, this work focuses on the experiences and memories of working class emigrants, drawing attention to common patterns of behaviour and perception as well as to differences due to factors such as age, gender and nationality.

Finally, mention must be made of one more distinctive trait of oral history, namely the interplay between past and present perspectives in the informants' narration.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, one feature of oral testimony that gives it a competitive edge over the contemporary document is its "longitudinal" character.<sup>38</sup> Actually, oral histories allow interviewees to reflect on past events as well as on their own actions and decisions, and often enable the researcher to follow the evolution of the informants' past feelings and attitudes over time. It is ingenuous, though, to believe that the testimony may represent 'a pure distillation of past experience. [...] For not even the informant is in direct touch with the past. His or her memories, however precise and vivid, are filtered through

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>35</sup> Tosh, *The Pursuit of History*, 300.

<sup>36</sup> Laura Anker, *Immigrant Voices from Home, Work, and Community: Women and Family in the Migration Process, 1890-1938* (PhD Diss., State University of New York, Stony Brook, 1983), 111.

<sup>37</sup> On the fact that oral histories establish a link between past and present, and have something to say about both the narrated past events and the present context in which the narration takes place see Alistair Thomson. "Anzac Memories. Putting Popular Memory Theory into Practice in Australia", in *The Oral History Reader*, edited by Perks and Thomson, 301.

<sup>38</sup> Eric Richards, "Hearing Voices: An Introduction," in *Speaking to Immigrants: Oral Testimony and the History of Australian Migration*, eds. A. James Hammerton and Eric Richards (Canberra: Pandanus Books, 2002), 8.

subsequent experience.’<sup>39</sup> The idea of a possible direct encounter with the past is illusory; inevitably, the “voice of the past” and the voice of the present overlap. Indeed, as all oral accounts take place in the present, the values and points of view expressed by the informants will be a blend of the perspectives operating in the past with those active at the moment of the interview.<sup>40</sup> Memory, in fact, is a continuously changing process;<sup>41</sup> it does not necessarily preserve faithful images of the past but images which are *useful* in the present, which are significant for the life of an individual or a group.<sup>42</sup>

Most of the distinctive characteristics of oral histories that have been described above will be seen, so to speak, “in action” in the chapters devoted to the in-depth analysis of the FWP and Ellis Island interviews. Truly, the sources utilized in this work make it possible to illuminate significant moments of the diasporic experience of British emigrants to the U.S. and to identify events that left their mark on the informants’ memories as well as some of those that were forgotten. Not only will the oral histories reveal what British immigrants did, but also what they wanted to do and thought they had done. The narratives will inform us about the meaning immigrants attached to events and circumstances, about their attitudes and emotional reactions towards the experiences defining the process of migration and resettlement in the new country. The interviews will enable us to get a glimpse of the opinions, the fears, the desires, the “culture” of the speakers, of their everyday life and interpersonal relationships. They will illuminate both shared and unique experiences of the emigrants’ bold venture and, in some cases, clearly show the interplay between past and present perspectives in the informants’ accounts.

The testimonies will also give access to dominant versions of present and past collective culture, since speakers inevitably ‘draw on generalized, public versions of the aspects of the lives that they are talking about to construct their own particular, personal accounts.’<sup>43</sup> The dominant ethos of a period, of course, can also be reflected in the fieldworkers’ research approach, which in turn shapes the character of the interviews. In fact, as has been noted, one of the characteristics of oral history is the interaction between speaker and interviewer, in particular the crucial role played by fieldworkers in the construction of oral accounts.

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<sup>39</sup> Tosh, *The Pursuit of History*, 303.

<sup>40</sup> Anker, *Immigrant Voices from Home, Work, and Community*, 113.

<sup>41</sup> Portelli, “Un lavoro di relazione. Osservazioni sulla storia orale,” 3.

<sup>42</sup> Franco Ferrarotti, *L’Italia fra storia e memoria. Appartenenza e identità* (Roma: Donzelli, 1997), 14.

<sup>43</sup> Penny Summerfield, “Culture and Composure: Creating Narratives of the Gendered Self in Oral History Interviews,” *Cultural and Social History* 1:1 (2004): 68.

The FWP and Ellis Island oral history programmes are quite different with regard to the role played by the interviewers. In fact, the documents produced by these programmes are distinct from each other in many other respects. As we shall see in the following chapter, they also diverge in their main objectives, in the nature of the interview guidelines adopted by the fieldworkers, in the overall tone of the narratives and the general context of production of the testimonies.

## CHAPTER 2

### *British voices yet unheard*

Memory is the raw material of history. Whether mental, oral, or written, it is the living source from which historians draw. [...] Moreover, the discipline of history nourishes memory in turn, and enters into the great dialectical process of memory and forgetting experienced by individuals and societies. The historian must be there to render an account of these memories and of what is forgotten, to transform them into something that can be conceived, to make them knowable.<sup>1</sup>

The contingent and discontinuous facts of the past become intelligible only when woven together as stories.<sup>2</sup>

During the last years of the Great Depression era the Federal Writers' Project fieldworkers conducted more than ten thousands interviews with ordinary people, which make up the largest body of first-person accounts ever collected in America.<sup>3</sup> Though nobody has attempted to define their number with an acceptable degree of approximation so far, these accounts certainly include hundreds of interviews with first-generation immigrants. Indeed, the life histories examined here and those quoted or referred to in works consulted for this study already amount to several hundreds. As to the Ellis Island collection, it simply represents the largest single body of immigrant interviews ever recorded in the United States (about 2,000 up to now).<sup>4</sup>

These stories provide a window on the migratory venture of millions of immigrants, including those coming from Great Britain, who moved to America from the mid-nineteenth century to World War II. They make the lives of individuals who left their country to settle elsewhere intelligible for us. In other words, they enable us to see beyond the contingent and discontinuous facts of the past and make sense of the emigrants' experience.

The main purpose of this chapter is to describe the spirit and objectives of the Federal Writers' Project and Ellis Island oral history programmes, discuss important narrative and linguistic aspects of the interviews as well as deal with the contributions

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Le Goff, *History and Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992, 1977c), xi-xii.

<sup>2</sup> David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 218.

<sup>3</sup> Ann Banks, ed., *First-Person America*, (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991, 1980c), xi, xiii.

<sup>4</sup> The figure is provided in the Statue of Liberty National Monument and Ellis Island's website: <http://www.nps.gov/archive/stli/serv02.htm#Silent>.



that have exploited these sources. This will enable the reader to better contextualize, historically and textually, the documents examined later on in the dissertation.

More precisely, the first section of the chapter outlines the historical background lying behind the production of the accounts, presents an overview of both the anthological works and critical essays based on the FWP and Ellis Island programmes, and draws attention to the oral histories by British immigrants that have found their way into publication. The second section focuses on various distinctive aspects of the testimonies, such as the questionnaires and interview guidelines that were adopted, the general tone of the accounts, the thematic structure of the narratives and the way in which the interviews were edited and transcribed. The critical analysis of the sources conducted in this chapter makes it possible, on the one hand, to draw attention to the documentary evidence provided by the FWP and Ellis Island projects. On the other, it enables us to highlight some of the serious flaws in the conception as well as production of the interviews, which do not alter the fact that they constitute valuable material for historical work.

## **I. Tapping the projects**

During the 1930s the American Federal Government provided jobs for millions of people through the Works Progress Administration (WPA), the largest New Deal agency established in 1935 to implement relief programmes for the needy. Although chiefly aimed at assisting manual workers, the WPA also established art, music, theatre and writers' programs. The Federal Writers' Project was created in order to employ a diverse assortment of white-collar workers such as, indeed, writers, but also teachers, librarians, editors, and clerks caught in the plight of the Depression.<sup>5</sup> Originally, it was meant to produce a series of state and local guidebooks (known under the collective name of "American Guide") which would illustrate the historical, economic, cultural, and scenic resources of the country, yet it eventually came to develop many new

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<sup>5</sup> Important monographs on the Federal Writers' Project venture are Jerre Mangione, *The Dream and the Deal. The Federal Writers' Project, 1935-1943* (New York: Avon Books, 1972), Monty Noam Penkower, *The Federal Writers' Project. A Study in Government Patronage of the Arts* (Urbana, Chicago, and London: University of Illinois Press, 1977) and, more recently, Jerrold Hirsch, *Portrait of America. A Cultural History of the Federal Writers' Project* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

projects.<sup>6</sup> Among the interests pursued by the FWP was the collection of urban and rural folklore, ordinary people's narratives, testimonies of ex-slaves, and information about the culture and customs of social and ethnic groups. The activity of the FWP, along with that of other WPA projects, contributed to the documentary movement which permeated America in the 1930s and found expression in fields as diverse as fiction, painting, dance, theatre, and nonfiction genres such as "worker narratives".<sup>7</sup> Through the years, the Project was subjected to increasing attack from reactionary Congressmen and red-baiters until it was compelled to transform its structure and eventually close down, in connection with the coming to an end of the Depression era and the changing political climate. In 1939 the WPA was renamed Works Projects Administration and the FWP reorganized as Writers' Program. Most importantly, the Program was placed under state financing and the funds allotted to it were curtailed. In its last period the Writers' Program shifted attention to war themes and then became the Writers' Unit of the War Services Subdivision of WPA. The new Unit, 'in issuing a practical statement to Congress which stressed a Military and Civilian Defense Series, seemed far from the project's original dream of an American Renaissance in culture. Only those state programs which "directly build morale or promote the public welfare" would be allowed to continue operations.'<sup>8</sup>

The life histories were produced as part of the activities of the Federal Writers' Project Folklore and Social-Ethnic Studies units, as well as gathered under the aegis of the Southeastern Regional Office.<sup>9</sup> The narratives were designed to document the

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<sup>6</sup> As Monty Noam Penkower observes, 'the FWP succeeded in fulfilling its *raison d'être* – the American Guide Series. [...] Even aside from the seminal guidebooks, the FWP made significant contributions in a number of areas. Its black studies were pioneering ones. Its social-ethnic folklore research represented novel approaches, as did the "life-history" technique of *These Are Our Lives*. Booklets on place-names, local legends, and many other subjects appeared regularly. Pamphlets for school use, publicity for newspapers, indexing of library files, and the verification of data for various federal and private concerns exemplified the project's diverse efforts.' Monty Penkower, *The Federal Writers' Project*, 240-41. The remarkable cultural inheritance left by the FWP was the work of a comparatively small agency which, in its heyday, in 1936, 'employed 6686 men and women at salaries of about 20 dollars a week, for a total of approximately 30 million dollars. These figures represented only a minute proportion of the over 2.5 million individuals who worked on the WPA and a similarly small proportion of its 5-billion-dollar budget. Despite this small budget and relatively few employees, the project bequeathed an impressive cultural legacy to the nation.' Laura Anker, "Immigrant Voices from the Federal Writers' Project: The Connecticut Ethnic Survey, 1937-40," in *The Mythmaking Frame of Mind: Social Imagination and American Culture*, edited by James Gilbert et al., (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1993), 274.

<sup>7</sup> William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1973), 4. On the New Deal documentary mood and, particularly, the activities of the WPA see *ibid.*, 92-118.

<sup>8</sup> Penkower, *The Federal Writers' Project*, 234. The entire WPA was eventually liquidated in June 1943.

<sup>9</sup> Some interviews, it is worth noting, were also collected as potentially useful material for the American Guide Project.

experience of individuals during the Great Depression and in the previous decades, covering a variety of topics such as family life, work, leisure activities, race relations, gender roles, religious beliefs and the impact of public events on private lives, thus seeking to provide a full picture of common people's existence.

National FWP officials aimed to construct an inclusive portrait of America, and one of the main instruments to do so was to enable marginalized individuals to speak directly to their fellow countrymen. Behind the adoption of the life history approach there was a clearly reformist and progressive political perspective, one which was characteristic of the times and is strikingly different from the outlook informing the Ellis Island interviews, as we shall see below. The Federal Writers' Project aimed at rewriting history "from the bottom up" by lending respectability and weight to the words of the oppressed and underprivileged in American society.<sup>10</sup> By providing a new portrait of industrial and farm workers, ethnic minorities, Indians, and ex-slaves, the FWP narratives also meant to offer a different view of the country's life and culture, which would create new and more inclusive meanings for the term "America".<sup>11</sup>

The FWP directors planned to publish several collections of life histories, forming a composite portrait of the United States based on the voices of people from various regions, ethnicities and occupations. However, in only few cases did some of the mass of oral material produced actually reach the public sphere when the agency was in operation or soon after it had closed.<sup>12</sup> This left a vast amount of unexploited material stored away in archives.<sup>13</sup>

After the end of the war, due to the changed social and political climate – the mood of the affluent and conservative Fifties contrasted sharply with that of the economically depressed and culturally progressive Thirties – the interest in the New Deal and its

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<sup>10</sup> Michael Dittman, "The Federal Writers' Project and the Creation of Hegemony," *49<sup>th</sup> Parallel* 2 (1999), 3-4.

<sup>11</sup> Hirsch, *Portrait of America*, 7.

<sup>12</sup> *These Are Our Lives* – a widely acclaimed anthology of thirty-five narratives by (mostly) ordinary black and white southern workers – came out in 1939, while *Lay My Burden Down* – a selection of excerpts and whole interviews with former slaves – was published in 1945. William T. Couch, ed., *These Are Our Lives* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1939); Benjamin A. Botkin, ed., *Lay My Burden Down* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1945). Interviews with black people, along with other research material, were also utilized in Virginia Work Projects Administration, *The Negro in Virginia, from 1619 to the Present Day* (New York: Hastings House, 1940).

<sup>13</sup> Many of the interviews contained in Ann Banks's *First Person America* 'were meant for anthologies left unfinished when the Project ended. These included projected volumes on granite carvers, western pioneers, and tobacco workers, and a book of New England life histories to be called *Yankee Folk*.' Banks, *First Person America*, xiv.

cultural undertakings waned, only to resume in the 1960s and flourishing later on.<sup>14</sup> The renewed attention paid to the FWP material has translated into the publication of a growing number of works anthologizing and analysing interviews on many aspects of ordinary folks' experience. The "typical" contribution based on the FWP oral histories presents a selection of testimonies, preceded by an introduction discussing editorial matters as well as providing a general outline of the FWP venture and the essential contextual backdrop against which to interpret the narratives. The more deeply researched volumes also supply informative historical, and at times biographical, headnotes introducing thematic sections or even single interviews.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps predictably, the anthologies that have appeared so far 'share most of the assumptions that led Writers' Project officials to initiate these programs. They emphasize that people not usually heard are gaining the chance to speak. They dignify the ordinary. They attach importance to the common person's view.'<sup>16</sup>

At first, it was the so-called "ex-slave narratives" that attracted the attention of scholars, in the wake of the 1960s civil rights and black power movements,<sup>17</sup> and then the life histories<sup>18</sup> were resurrected at the end of the following decade. This was partly connected to the ethnic revival of the 1970s.<sup>19</sup> In fact, among the voices of common

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<sup>14</sup> Writing in 1972, Jerre Mangione observed that the work of the Federal Writers' Project was finally coming to the fore: '[p]ossibly because it was such an innate part of the thirties, a decade which of late has been vigorously promoted in academic circles, the fog which has long obscured its accomplishments has begun to lift. [...] At the same time an increasing number of Project books are being revised and reissued.' Mangione, *The Dream and the Deal*, 372.

<sup>15</sup> This is the case, for instance, with Charles L. Jr. Perdue, and Nancy J. Martin-Perdue, eds., *Talk about Trouble. A New Deal Portrait of Virginians in the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

<sup>16</sup> Hirsch, *Portrait of America*, 148.

<sup>17</sup> After Botkin's classic *Lay My Burden Down*, the first studies to make extensive use of the ex-slave narratives appeared in the 1970s, the major exception being Charles H. Nichols's *Many Thousands Gone. The Ex-Slaves' Account of Their Bondage and Freedom* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963). Norman R. Yetman included 102 unpublished accounts in *Life Under the 'Peculiar Institution'. Selections from the Slave Narrative Collection* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1970). George P. Rawick edited a monumental nineteen-volume facsimile collection of slave narratives: *The American Slave. A Composite Autobiography* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972) is made up of an introductory interpretative essay – *From Sundown to Sunup. The Making of the Black Community* –, sixteen volumes reproducing FWP narratives and two books containing interviews with ex-slaves collected at Fisk University. Twenty-two additional volumes of previously unpublished material came out a few years later as the original series supplements: George P. Rawick, Jan Hillegas and Ken Lawrence, eds., *The American Slave. A Composite Autobiography. Supplement, series 1*, 12 vols. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1977); George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave. A Composite Autobiography. Supplement, series 2*, 10 vols. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1979). Another important work issued in the 1970s is Charles L. Perdue Jr., Thomas E. Barden, Robert K. Phillips, eds., *Weevils in the Wheat. Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1976).

<sup>18</sup> Though the interviews dealing with slavery are "life histories" too, they are commonly called "ex-slave", or sometimes just "slave", narratives.

<sup>19</sup> Hirsch, *Portrait of America*, 150.

people included in published anthologies are also those of first-generation immigrants and later-generation ethnics. The collections that marked a turning point in the exploitation of the life histories were Tom Terrill and Jerrold Hirsch's *Such as Us: Southern Voices of the Thirties*, issued in 1978,<sup>20</sup> and the seminal anthology edited by Ann Banks that came out two years later, which presents eighty narratives culled from the thousands of interviews preserved at the Library of Congress.<sup>21</sup> In the last thirty years great attention has continued to be paid to the ex-slave narratives, yet many contributions drawing on the life histories have also been published.<sup>22</sup>

The oral material gathered by the FWP fieldworkers has already been used to cast light on a variety of topics on a local, state, regional and national level, and to investigate race, ethnic and gender issues as well as, though not to the same degree, the experience of Native Americans.<sup>23</sup> However, considering the increasing attention paid to the history of ordinary Americans and the wide range of FWP documents yet to be published and analysed, it is unlikely that the scholarly interest in these sources will diminish in the near future.<sup>24</sup> The present work confirms this trend while at the same time aiming to stimulate research on the experience of specific ethnic groups as represented in the FWP narratives, a topic which has been given insufficient attention

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<sup>20</sup> Tom E. Terrill and Jerrold Hirsch, eds., *Such as Us. Southern Voices of the Thirties* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1978).

<sup>21</sup> Banks, *First Person America*.

<sup>22</sup> Needless to say, there are also many essays which utilize the FWP oral histories as a source among others. See, for example, Jack T. Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost. The American South, 1920-1960* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987) and Idus A. Newby, *Plain Folk in the New South. Social Change and Cultural Persistence 1880-1915* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989).

<sup>23</sup> The following list is illustrative, and limited to books. On ex-slave narratives cf., among others, George E. Lankford, ed., *Bearing Witness. Memories of Arkansas Slavery Narratives from the 1930s WPA Collections* (Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 2003); Al Hester, ed., *Athens Memories. The WPA Federal Writers Project's American Life Histories* (Athens, GA: Green Berry Press, 2001); Ronald L. Baker, *Homeless, Friendless, and Penniless. The WPA Interviews with Former Slaves Living in Indiana* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000); Lindsay T. Baker and Julie P. Baker, eds., *The WPA Oklahoma Slave Narratives* (Norman and London: The University of Oklahoma Press, 1996). As regards books based on the "life histories" see Perdue and Martin-Perdue, *Talk About Trouble*; James Seay Brown Jr., ed., *Up Before Daylight: Life Histories from the Alabama Writers' Project, 1938-39* (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 1982); Terri M. Baker and Connie Oliver Henshaw, eds. *Women Who Pioneered Oklahoma. Stories from the WPA Narratives* (Norman: The University of Oklahoma Press, 2007). This last volume offers a useful presentation of excerpts from primary sources yet it falls short of academic standards by not supplying precise archival references, adequate explanatory notes and in-depth contextual information. Much less attention has been directed to the FWP interviews with Native Americans, though studies seem to be growing lately. Cf. Theda Perdue, *Nations Remembered. An Oral History of the Five Civilized Tribes, 1865-1907* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980); David La Vere, *Life among the Texas Indians. The WPA Narratives* (College Station: Texas A. & M. University Press, 1998); Herbert S. Lewis, ed., *Oneida Lives. Long Lost Voices of the Wisconsin Oneidas* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2005). More critical contributions focussing on or utilizing FWP life histories are dealt with in the section on immigrant narratives below.

<sup>24</sup> Hirsch, *Portrait of America*, 148.

up to now. In fact, though a certain number of accounts by members of ethnic minorities have been included in the FWP interview anthologies published so far, as noted above, very few works have concentrated exclusively on immigrant narratives. In truth, the experience of immigrants is usually subsumed with that of ordinary folk. So far, two volumes consisting of excerpts taken from interviews with immigrants of various nationalities have been published, one drawing upon material produced in New Jersey and the other in Connecticut,<sup>25</sup> while Stewart C. Doty's work on Franco-Americans is the only volume focussing on the life histories of members of a specific ethnic group.<sup>26</sup> *Men Against Granite*, the recently edited collection of testimonies gathered by Mari Tomasi and Roaldus Richmond in Barre, Vermont,<sup>27</sup> also contains numerous narratives by emigrants, many of whom were Scots or Italians, given the job skills required in the granite industry and the artistic talent often required in carving. These volumes introduce the selection of immigrants' voices by presenting the work of the FWP and placing the newcomers' experiences in their historical context. They also provide introductory headnotes to the various sections into which the books are divided and, in two of the four volumes, to the excerpted life histories. However, these are not in-depth critical essays. Indeed, up to now, the only scholarly interpretive contribution focussed on FWP interviews with immigrants remains Laura Anker's PhD thesis.<sup>28</sup>

As yet, just a handful of FWP interviews with people from Great Britain have been quoted or referred to by historians in their works. Three excerpts – one from the life history of an anonymous Scottish immigrant, another from the narrative of woman from Scotland identified as Mrs. "Y.", the third from the account of Mary Knott, a 59-year

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<sup>25</sup> David Cohen's *America, the Dream of My Life. Selections from the Federal Writers' Project's New Jersey Ethnic Survey* (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 1990); Bruce M. Stave and John F. Sutherland's *From the Old Country. An Oral History of European Migration to America* (Hanover, NH and London: University Press of New England, 1994). Together with FWP narratives, Stave and Sutherland exploit interviews conducted in the 1970s and 1980s by the University of Connecticut Center for Oral History.

<sup>26</sup> Stewart C. Doty, *The First Franco-Americans: New England Life Histories from the Federal Writers Project, 1938-1939* (Orono, MA: University of Maine at Orono Press, 1985). By Doty see also: "Going to the States: Testimony from the Franco-American Life History Narratives in the Federal Writers' Project, 1938-1939," *Contemporary French Civilization* 7 (1983): 275-92. Articles focussed on FWP interviews with immigrants are also: David E. O'Connor, "Swedish Element in Connecticut," *Swedish-American Historical Quarterly* 36: 4 (1985): 275-99, and Elias Vlantou and Evangeline Newton, "Greek Immigrants and the Federal Writers' Project: A Comprehensive Bibliography of State Holdings," *Journal of the Hellenic Diaspora* 20: 1 (1994): 87-96.

<sup>27</sup> Mari Tomasi and Roaldus Richmond, *Men Against Granite*, ed. Alfred Rosa and Mark Wanner (Shelburne, VT: New England Press, 2004).

<sup>28</sup> Laura Anker, *Immigrant Voices from Home, Work and Community: Women and Family in the Migration Process 1890-1938* (PhD Diss. State University of New York, Stony Brook, 1983); by Laura Anker see also "Immigrant Voices from the Federal Writers' Project".

old woman of English descent – are contained in Bruce M. Stave and John F. Sutherland's *From the Old Country*.<sup>29</sup> The afore-mentioned volume on Vermont's granite industry reproduces, as we have noted, various narratives by first-generation Scots or people of Scottish descent: the testimony of Aberdeen stoneworker Michael Donegal<sup>30</sup> can be read here, along with the account of Pepe Perez, a quarryman with a Scottish mother and a Spanish father, an interview with a third-generation Scot and the story of a Scottish quarryman's widow.<sup>31</sup> Charles L. Perdue Jr. and Nancy J. Martin-Perdue's *Talk About Trouble. A New Deal Portrait of Virginians in the Great Depression* includes two interviews with second-generation English immigrants to Virginia, Mrs Susie Young Smith and Mr Joe Hippert,<sup>32</sup> and an excerpt from a narrative of a second-generation English woman is also contained in the volume edited by Terri M. Baker and Connie Oliver Henshaw on female pioneers in Oklahoma.<sup>33</sup> Finally, several FWP life histories have been drawn upon, but never quoted at any length, by Rebecca Bartholomew in her monograph on early British Mormon immigrants.<sup>34</sup>

As the foregoing clearly demonstrates, what has been said about scholars' limited use of the FWP immigrant narratives applies all the more to the interviews with people from Great Britain: these have seldom been reproduced or quoted in research works and have never been analysed in any depth. This is fundamentally also the case with the accounts gathered by the Ellis Island oral history programme, which aims at preserving the memories of men and women who landed in America in the 1892-1954 period, when Ellis Island was used as an immigration centre.<sup>35</sup>

More than 12 million people were processed in the island's facilities, most of them from 1892 to 1924, i.e. from when Ellis Island became the headquarters of the federal Immigration and Naturalization Service for the New York area to the year in which a bill severely limiting immigration was approved by the American Congress.<sup>36</sup> The gradual enforcement of the 1920s restrictionist immigration law and the onset of the

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<sup>29</sup> Stave and Sutherland, *From the Old Country*, 32-34; 194.

<sup>30</sup> An abridged version of this interview is included in Banks, ed., *First Person America*, 103.

<sup>31</sup> Tomasi and Richmond, *Men Against Granite*, 181-85; 240-45; 255-58; 269-273.

<sup>32</sup> Perdue and Martin-Perdue, *Talk About Trouble*, 85-89; 308-12.

<sup>33</sup> Baker and Henshaw, *Women Who Pioneered Oklahoma*, 15.

<sup>34</sup> Rebecca Bartholomew, *Audacious Women. Early British Mormon Immigrants* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1995). The author refers to the life histories of Robinson Allred Clara Alice, Wade Allred Isabella, Weaver Brown Lizzie and Chapple Warner Mary Ann.

<sup>35</sup> The programme 'also encompasses the experiences of former employees and military personnel stationed at Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty'. <http://www.nps.gov/elis/historyculture/oral-history-program.htm>

<sup>36</sup> The quota system and the consequence it had on the emigration process of some of the Ellis Island informants will be discussed in Chapter 3.

Great Depression fundamentally changed the function of the island's facilities, which now mostly served as a detention and deportation centre for criminal and illegal aliens. In 1940 Ellis Island became a 'federal enemy receiving station, and two years later approximately 1,000 German, Italian and Japanese enemy aliens were held on the island. In 1943 all Immigration and Naturalization Service functions except for detention were moved to the WPA Headquarters building in Manhattan.'<sup>37</sup> In its last years Ellis Island was also used as a sort of laboratory for the cure of physical and psychological disorders and the experimentation of special medical treatments (such as the shock therapy). Eventually, in November 1954, the place was completely abandoned.<sup>38</sup>

In 1965, President Lyndon Johnson attached Ellis Island to the Statue of Liberty as a national monument and entrusted the National Park Service with the maintenance of the immigration centre. Yet the facilities remained in a state of disrepair until 1986, when the renovation of the Statue called attention to the condition of Ellis Island as well. Four years later, after a successful fundraising campaign and the restoration of the main building, the centre opened to the general public.<sup>39</sup>

Together with the Statue of Liberty, Ellis Island has become a symbol embodying and at the same time reinforcing the public interpretation of the history of emigration to the United States and, more generally, the dominant cultural understandings that American society has of itself. Such interpretation is based on the notion that moving to America 'was essentially a strike for personal freedom and the enhancement of individual opportunity [and that] this nation is today what it has always been: a place for hope and opportunity for diverse and less fortunate people throughout the world.'<sup>40</sup> As we shall see below, this is the view that essentially shapes the approach of the Ellis Island Oral History Project fieldworkers.

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<sup>37</sup> Desforges, Luke and Maddern Joanne, "Front Doors to Freedom, Portal to Past: History at the Ellis Island Immigration Museum, New York," *Social & Cultural Geography* 5, 3 (September 2004): 441.

<sup>38</sup> Barry Moreno, "Foreword" to *Ellis Island Interviews. In Their Own Words*, ed. Coan, Peter Morton (New York: Facts On File, 1997), xvi; Coan, *Ellis Island Interviews*, xxvii-xxviii.

<sup>39</sup> Coan, *Ellis Island Interviews*, xxx-xxxii. For a brief summary of the fundraising campaign and Ellis Island restoration process, as well as of the individuals and bodies involved in them see Judith Smith, "Celebrating Immigration History at Ellis Island," *American Quarterly* 44, 1 (March 1992): 86-88. More generally, on Ellis Island see Barry Moreno, *Encyclopedia of Ellis Island* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2004).

<sup>40</sup> John Bodnar, "Symbols and Servants: Immigrant America and the Limits of Public History," *The Journal of American History* 73, 1 (June 1986): 137. In particular, it is since the resurgence of enthusiasm for ethnic roots in the 1970s and the publicity following the campaign to renovate the Statue of Liberty and the Ellis Island immigration buildings that Ellis Island has come to be recognized by Americans as an important historical site. Smith, "Celebrating Immigration History at Ellis Island": 84.



The oral history programme was started in 1973 by National Park Service employee Margo Nash under the aegis of the American Museum of Immigration, the precursor of today's Ellis Island Museum seated in the base of the Statue of Liberty. Yet most of the interviews have been recorded (in *audio* format) since the 1990s, and are still being recorded today. Actually, in 1990 – concurrently with the opening of the new museum after the restoration of the island's main building – the Ellis Island Series of the oral history project was launched, as a final attempt to locate the surviving immigrants who went through America's mythical Golden Door and tape their stories.<sup>41</sup>

This large collection of source material awaits being fully exploited by scholars. In fact, unlike the FWP interviews, there does not seem to be a significantly growing academic interest in these documents yet. In 1979 David M. Brownstone, Irene M. Franck and Douglass Brownstone published *Island of Hope, Island of Tears*, an introductory survey combining historical analysis and first-hand testimony to outline the experience of Europeans moving to America in the first decades of the twentieth century. This work, which focuses on the exodus from eastern and southern Europe, quotes at length from the 1970s oral history collection of the then American Museum of Immigration at the Statue of Liberty National Monument, as well as from the Polonia collection located at the Chicago Historical Society.<sup>42</sup>

The interviewees conducted since 1990 have only recently begun to be tapped. In 1997 Peter Morton Coan assembled a wide selection of excerpts from the emigrants' narratives in a volume entitled *Ellis Island Interviews: In Their Own Words*, which addresses the general public rather than an academic audience.<sup>43</sup> This book reserves sections for the voices of immigrants of various nationalities, including emigrants from England, Scotland, and Wales (10, 2 and 3 extracts respectively).<sup>44</sup> Marjory Harper has referred to some of the Ellis Island interviews in a monograph (published in 1998) mostly devoted to the Scots' movement to Canada. In this work Harper mainly relies on

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<sup>41</sup> Most of the EI Series interviews have been conducted by oral historians Janet Levine and Paul E. Sigrist Jr., while other National Park Service personnel are responsible for the interviews done before 1990.

<sup>42</sup> David M. Brownstone, Irene M. Franck, and Douglass Brownstone, *Island of Hope, Island of Tears* (New York: MetroBooks, 2000, 1979c).

<sup>43</sup> Coan, *Ellis Island Interviews*.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 76-104, 132-138 and 140-149. The author changed the names of the informants to respect their privacy and made significant editorial changes in the transcript excerpts that he published. Appendix I specifies which of the interviews with British immigrants used in this work have been excerpted by Coan. Two of the informants quoted by Coan will not be found, as their interviews are not relevant for this work. Also, apparently, the Ellis Island collection does not contain the interview with Bob Hope which Coan includes in his anthology. George Tselos (Supervisory Archivist and Head of Reference Services at the Ellis Island Museum), email to author, 30 November 2010.

traditional documentation, dealing only briefly with the Ellis Island narratives when discussing the motives for emigration and the experiences of Scottish settlers in the United States.<sup>45</sup> Finally, Angela McCarthy is the only author so far to have exploited these sources in some depth. She has done it in an article discussing transatlantic networks and the sense of identity of Scottish migrants to North America<sup>46</sup> as well as in a recent monograph on twentieth-century Irish and Scottish migration to North America and the British Dominions. This discusses some of the main themes covered in the accounts of the Ellis Island informants – among them, the emigrants’ motivations for leaving their country, the ocean crossing and processing at Ellis Island, the newcomers’ preservation of their ethnic identity.<sup>47</sup> McCarthy has undoubtedly produced a scholarly and informative study of Scottish and Irish migration which primarily draws upon oral accounts to talk about a variety of aspects of the emigrants’ experience. Yet she does not seem to have adequately exploited her sources. In fact, she repeatedly refers to the same core documents, while a discussion of a wider range of narratives would have been desirable. The present work, therefore, is the first to systematically and thoroughly exploit the potential of the Ellis Island interviews for telling the story of British emigration to America, and the first ever to shed light on the Ellis Island testimonies of immigrants from England and Wales.

## II. The FWP life histories and the Ellis Island interviews as historical sources

Many scholars reserve the term “oral history” for audio recorded interviews,<sup>48</sup> since meaningful aspects of the informants’ discourse are carried by such elements as rhythm, intonation, pitch or pauses in their speech, all of which can only be grasped by *listening*

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<sup>45</sup> Marjory Harper, *Emigration from Scotland between the Wars: Opportunity or Exile?* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 142-46.

<sup>46</sup> Angela McCarthy, “Ethnic Networks and Identities Among Inter-war Scottish Migrants in North America,” in *A Global Clan. Scottish Migrant Networks and Identities Since the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Angela McCarthy, (London and New York: Tauris Academic Studies, 2006), 203-226.

<sup>47</sup> Angela McCarthy, *Personal Narratives of Irish and Scottish Migration, 1921-65. ‘For Spirit and Adventure’* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2007).

<sup>48</sup> For example, in the latest fat manual on the topic, Ronald Grele singles out sound as one of the peculiar characteristics of oral history, while Donald A. Ritchie adds video to sound recording in his recent definition of this method of historical documentation. Ronald Grele, “Oral History as Evidence,” in *Handbook of Oral History*, ed. Thomas L. Charlton, Lois E. Myers, and Rebecca Sharpless (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2006), 77; Donald A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 19.

to the narrators' words.<sup>49</sup> The accounts produced by the FWP fieldworkers, collected at a time when portable and relatively cheap and easy-to-use tape recorders were not available,<sup>50</sup> would not therefore fall within this domain. Yet scholars have also often regarded these narratives as oral history, with or without qualification, irrespective of their having just been noted down.<sup>51</sup>

Undoubtedly, sound recording cannot be the sole or even the main criterion to classify interviews as oral histories. After all, the FWP transcripts originate from the same communicative events from which taped oral history springs: an encounter between a fieldworker and one or more informants, generating a narrative on important aspects of the informants' personal experience that can be used as source material for historical work. The fact that such an event happens not to have been recorded does not alter its nature.

In any case, the reality of the production and storage of interviews is rather complex, and this should advise against adopting too narrow a definition of oral history. In fact, of some interviews only the transcripts remain, since the tapes on which they had been originally recorded were erased, possibly to be reused.<sup>52</sup> It might also happen that the magnetic tape deteriorate (or the file gets damaged, in the case of contemporary digital recording) before a copy of the interview has been made. Moreover, interviews have been carried out without the help of the tape recorder also in the post-World War II period, even by outstanding exponents of the oral history movement such as Danilo Montaldi and Nuto Revelli in Italy.<sup>53</sup> Finally, note-taking may at times be the only feasible method to document a conversation, for instance when the informant objects to both video and sound recording.

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<sup>49</sup> Cf. the often-quoted essay by Alessandro Portelli, "What Makes Oral History Different?", in Id. *The Death of Luigi Trastulli*, 45-58, in particular 46-48.

<sup>50</sup> 'The first recording machine, the phonograph, was invented in 1877, and the steel wire recorder just before 1900. By the 1930s a considerably improved version was good enough for use in broadcasting. A decade later magnetic tape was available and the first tape recorders of the reel-to-reel type sold on the market. The much cheaper cassette recorders came in the early 1960s'. Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 3<sup>rd</sup> revised edition 2000), 61.

<sup>51</sup> Paul Thompson, for example, includes the FWP venture among the "antecedents" of the oral history movement but then, perhaps by a revealing slip of the pen, refers to W. T. Couch's famous 1939 work, *These Are Our Lives*, as just oral history. Similarly, on the title page of the anthology of FWP narratives edited by Ann Banks, Eric Foner defines the book as '[t]he finest example yet of the increasingly important genre of oral history.' Thompson, *The Voice of the Past*, 64; Banks, *First-person America*.

<sup>52</sup> This is the case, for example, with the Columbia Oral History project in its early stage: the archival approach and the reverence for written sources implied considering the (polished) transcript the real document to be preserved.

<sup>53</sup> At the beginning of their research career neither Montaldi nor Revelli taped their informants. See Danilo Montaldi, *Autobiografie della leggera* (Torino: Einaudi, 1961); Danilo Montaldi, *Militanti politici di base* (Torino: Einaudi, 1971); Nuto Revelli, *La strada del Davai* (Torino: Einaudi, 1966).

If one holds that only audio recorded interviews qualify as oral history since they convey levels of meaning that the written word cannot communicate one needs to become aware that some reservations could also be expressed with regard to the “incompleteness” or even the “distortion” potential of sound recordings themselves, as there are levels and nuances of meaning that only *video* recording is able to catch.<sup>54</sup> Besides, one should remember that the microphone, and consequently audio recording, does not pick up the entire sound waveband, and therefore is unable to reproduce the communicative event faithfully.<sup>55</sup>

Lastly, it must be acknowledged that a good transcription might sometimes convey the meaning of the words uttered by the informant more clearly and effectively than the taped conversation, due to the fuzzy nature of human speech (those who prepare an oral history collection for publication know this well). Regardless of the characteristics of human speech, reading a good transcription of a testimony (which always involves some degree of editing) may be preferable to listening to the tape for a variety of reasons: for example, to reach a wider readership while preserving the flavour of the speakers’ narration.<sup>56</sup>

The foregoing does not only imply that, since writing and speaking are two different means of communication, changes are necessary in the passage from spoken to written text and that what works in one means might not work in the other. It also suggests that, in order to pursue specific objectives and convey meaning more forcefully, oral history may have to rely on the written text rather than the spoken word – sometimes on substantially reworked written text – and that if something, perhaps a lot, is lost in the passage from speech to writing, something (a lot?) can also be gained. In sum, it appears to be sensible to adopt a reasonably flexible definition of oral history that avoid making a fetish of the audio (or video) recording. The one proposed by Alice Hoffman is general enough to sidestep the issue of recording and can thus be readily applied to

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<sup>54</sup> Actually, the video interview is not simply a more “complete” document than the sound recording since, among other things, it establishes a point of view and affect the performance of both interviewer and interviewee in various ways. This is not the place to discuss such an issue at length; suffice it to say that, quite intuitively, the video interview is a *different*, not a better, document than the audio interview. More on this in Mario Varricchio, “Storia orale e storiografia”, *Ricerche storiche* 33, 2-3 (maggio-dicembre 2003), 471n.

<sup>55</sup> ‘[T]he first selection has come in the very act of recording, for the technology itself has selected, out of the total range of sound, both of the voice and the audio world of the voice, only that which can be heard by the microphone. Therefore, even listening to the tapes rather than reading a transcript, although it may get one closer to the phenomenon of the interview, does not replicate the interview fully.’ Grele, “Oral History as Evidence,” 80.

<sup>56</sup> Rebecca Jones, “Blended Voices: Crafting a Narrative from Oral History Interviews,” *The Oral History Review* 31:1 (2004): 26.

the FWP narratives: ‘Oral history may be defined as a process of collecting, *usually* by means of a tape-recorded interview, reminiscences, accounts, and interpretations of events from the recent past which are of historical significance.’<sup>57</sup>

Having ascertained that the accounts produced by WPA workers belong to the “family” of oral history, attention can now be turned to their specific characteristics.

The FWP narratives vary in length and style, and the information they contain markedly differs in substance and detail. The interviews are normally short, ranging from one to ten typed pages but mostly not exceeding five, though some are longer or even occasionally much longer than that. The testimonies may also be preceded by headnotes providing background information on both the narrators and their surroundings.

Many of the life histories examined in this work were collected by the Folklore Unit of the Federal Writers’ Project, under the direction of Benjamin A. Botkin. Botkin favoured a research method which consisted in encouraging people to speak freely, following their spontaneous association of memories and ideas.<sup>58</sup> The structure of the interviews shows that the fieldworkers essentially followed this approach, which also involved asking a small number of fixed questions. In fact, the narrator’s life history was an essential part of the folklore interview. The *Manual for Folklore Studies*<sup>59</sup> with which fieldworkers were provided ‘included, in Form B, “Personal History of the Informant”, questions on ancestry, place and date of birth, family, place lived in, education, community and religious activities, description of informant.’<sup>60</sup> To be sure, this was no detailed questionnaire, but merely an indication of the main subjects to be raised during an interview (cf. Appendix II). One of the reasons for drawing up such a basic list of topics for the personal history of the informant is arguably the fact that the Folklore Unit focused on the study of ordinary people’s customs and beliefs, rather than on the collection of social and ethnic data. By contrast, the avowed aim of the project directed by sociologist Morton Royse – as specified in the *Manual for Social-Ethnic*

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<sup>57</sup> Alice Hoffman, “Reliability and Validity in Oral History,” in *Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*, ed. Willa K. Baum and David Dunaway (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1984), 68.

<sup>58</sup> Banks, *First Person America*, xv.

<sup>59</sup> *Manual for Folklore Studies*, Federal Writers’ Project, [n.p.] 1938. Library of Congress, Washington, D.C Manuscript Division, ML3551.F29.

<sup>60</sup> Benjamin A. Botkin, “We Called It ‘Living Lore,’” *New York Folklore Quarterly* 14:3 (1958 Fall): 189-210.

*Studies*<sup>61</sup> – was to present ‘a composite picture of America in terms of migrations, earning a living, ways of living, and social and cultural life.’<sup>62</sup> Indeed, the collection of life histories was considered to be essential to attain this objective.

The accounts produced by the Social-Ethnic Studies Unit analysed in this work are often similar in both form and content to those produced by the Folklore Unit. Actually, while in theory they pursued different objectives, in practice the distinction between these two FWP sections was blurred, since both emphasized the collection of first-person narratives and drew on the same pool of fieldworkers.<sup>63</sup> Predictably, Royse advised that a larger number of topics be probed to provide a multifaceted portrait of the life of the members of each ethnic group.<sup>64</sup> Part IV of the *Manual for Social-Ethnic Studies* (cf. Appendix II) identified four main areas of investigation of the immigrant experience and implicitly dictated the agenda of the interviews, or at least provided many suggestions on possible topics to be discussed with the informant: for example, the “Earning a Living” subsection mentioned ‘wages, hours, conditions of work, employment of women and children, unemployment, and organizations.’<sup>65</sup>

No matter what the question list to be followed by the fieldworkers was, though, the spirit behind the FWP’s venture remained that of letting the people “speak for themselves”. Fieldworkers must not impose their agenda on the interview but limit themselves to eliciting the informants’ story and then reproduce it faithfully. Having a longer list of questions was only a way to make sure informants would be given the chance to talk about key aspects of their experience and did not fundamentally change the “speaker-oriented” approach of the FWP folklore and social-ethnic studies. Furthermore, at the end of Royse’s handbook reference is made to the ‘fairly simple and flexible’ interview forms included in the *Manual for Folklore Studies*, duplicate copies of which were said to be available in the State Offices.<sup>66</sup> This could be easily seen as an invitation to use Botkin’s sketchy interview outline, leaving aside the more detailed questionnaire provided in the *Manual for Social-Ethnic Studies*, which could thus be

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<sup>61</sup> *Manual for Social-Ethnic Studies*, Federal Writers’ Project, [n.p.] 1938. Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., Manuscript Division, US WPA Records, Container A8. The *Manual for Folklore Studies* and the *Manual for Social-Ethnic Studies* are often called the Botkin and Royse manuals, for short, after the names of the heads of the FWP Folklore and Social-Ethnic Studies Units respectively.

<sup>62</sup> *Manual for Social-Ethnic Studies*, 7.

<sup>63</sup> Banks, *First Person America*, xv, footnote. As Benjamin Botkin himself remembers, the two sets of studies ‘fed each other, were carried on often by the same workers, and were planned jointly by Morton W. Royse, social-ethnic editor, and myself.’ Botkin, “We Called It Living Lore”.

<sup>64</sup> See *Manual for Social-Ethnic Studies*, 8-9.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

seen by fieldworkers as only applying to the general production of ethnic studies but not necessarily to the collection of interviews.

In addition to this, it is worth remembering that the fieldworkers had often to content themselves with summary instructions. Indeed, though the FWP workers in various states must have received the guidelines drawn up in the national offices, some of them certainly did not. For instance, none of the program manuals were distributed to the Virginia Writers' Project researchers. Instead, 'a two-page form letter in November 1938 announced the start of a "Social-Ethnic Studies" program, instructed workers to obtain "life histories" of persons in suggested occupational groups [...] and elsewhere brought in phrases from Royse's and Botkin's manuals. A two-page interview guide accompanied the letter, and this four-page packet replaced almost forty pages of program manuals.'<sup>67</sup> In any case, whatever the instructions at their disposal, fieldworkers often seem not to have followed them strictly. Truly, the fact that the national manuals and the question guidelines they included constituted a point of reference for the fieldworkers as well as the state and local officials who "adapted" them is quite obvious, and it is clearly revealed by the recurrence of specific topics in the informants' answers – as we shall see below, the voice of the fieldworkers is normally concealed in the transcriptions, and thus it is not possible to tell exactly which questions they posed, though a fairly easy guess can often be made from the answers. At the same time, the thematic heterogeneity of the narratives shows that things were often not done "by the book", no matter what the "book" was. This obviously affected the quality of the testimonies, particularly when the suggested question list covered many important aspects of the immigrants' experience, as is the case with the *Field Workers' Manual for the Study of Life Histories of First and Second Generation Immigrants* produced by the Connecticut Ethnic Group Survey.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Perdue and Martin-Perdue, *Talk About Trouble*, 5.

<sup>68</sup> *A Field Workers' Manual for the Study of Life Histories of First and Second Generation Immigrants*, New Haven, Connecticut, August, 1937. University of Connecticut Libraries, Storrs, Connecticut. Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, Archives & Special Collections, Connecticut Ethnic Survey, WPA Federal Writers' Project, Box 30, file 120:2. This handbook provided interviewers with 'a sample questionnaire that went into great detail concerning essential matters of immigrant life: the homeland, family life, attitudes and values, religion, diet, recreation, reasons for immigration, first impressions of America, adjustment and work.' Bruce M. Stave, "'The Doctor Told Us What He Wanted': Sam Koenig's Instructions to WPA Ethnic Group Survey Interviewers," *Oral History Review* 34: 2 (2007): 24. Yet, while some interviewers followed the questionnaire or tried hard to do so, others did as they chose. *Ibid.*, 24. The few interviews with British immigrants analysed in this work that were collected in Connecticut are among the most detailed narratives in the corpus, yet the fieldworkers do not seem to have followed the proposed questionnaire closely.

Provided they had been applied faithfully, the suggestions on the topics to be covered during an interview given in Royse's *Manual for Social-Ethnic Studies* would have enabled many fieldworkers to produce rather detailed accounts. By contrast, Botkin's "free association" method was hazardous, as it had to rely on both the "value" of the source and the ability of the interviewer to stimulate the informant's narration. In these cases, as Botkin himself realized, the best results could be obtained only 'when a good informant and a good interviewer got together and the narrative [was] the process of the conscious or unconscious collaboration of the two,'<sup>69</sup> a difficult combination to achieve, owing perhaps especially to the inadequacy of many fieldworkers.

In fact, a crucial factor affecting the quality of the narratives was the failings of many of the interviewers. While some of them were capable and dedicated, others were not up to the task, indicating that the majority of FWP personnel were not unemployed *writers* but people who could somehow qualify for the job, not experts in the field 'but simply willing workers in need.'<sup>70</sup> As Jerrold Hirsch points out, 'Project employees had to be selected from the relief rolls, except for a small percentage of supervisors who were exempted from this requirement.'<sup>71</sup> Examples of the generally limited command of the art of interviewing on the part of the fieldworkers is the fact that they often did not pursue important points during the conversation, and occasionally intruded and judged, while they had been told not to do so.<sup>72</sup> Therefore, the end result of an interview was frequently casual, with the quality and length of the narratives often depending on the informant's response. By and large, the impression one obtains from many of the interviews is that they could have yielded much more in the hands of better trained fieldworkers, and that the potentially fruitful relationship between researchers and informants was often underexploited. Finally, it also needs to be stressed that, owing to the general approach of the fieldworkers and the fact that many of the interviews analyzed here were gathered as part of the Folklore Unit, the specific features of British immigrants' experience in America come less often to the foreground than it would be desirable.

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<sup>69</sup> Botkin, *Lay My Burden Down*, xvi.

<sup>70</sup> Penkower, *The Federal Writers' Project*, 238.

<sup>71</sup> Hirsch, *Portrait of America*, 35. Besides, the emphasis on guides 'meant that the project could employ individuals with varied talents – typists, teachers, journalists, lawyers, mapmakers, and scholars – who would have no place on a Writers' Project devoted solely to giving sustenance to novelists, poets, essayists, and other "writers.'" Ibid., 35.

<sup>72</sup> Hirsch, *Portrait of America*, 154.



In order to provide an in-depth description of the characteristics of the FWP interviews it is crucial to address the issues of the transcription and editing process of the life histories, since these were not recorded but reconstructed from notes, as has been seen. The editing process, as we shall see below, has aroused misgivings in some scholars concerning the FWP interviews' reliability as historical sources. By contrast, there is no serious problem of editing to be discussed in connection with the transcriptions of the Ellis Island oral histories. In this case, in fact, a "standard" transcription procedure has been followed. This involves the reproduction of the interviewers' questions as well as the interviewees' answers and the adaptation and normalization of elements typical of the oral medium to the written one. Thus, for example, texts have been polished up by eliminating repetitions and false starts, and completing unfinished words or expressions.<sup>73</sup> The purpose of such changes is to make the reading of the written text smoother, while not sacrificing important traits of the verbal communication. Normally, standard transcriptions also indicate pauses or hesitations on the part of the informants, meaningful gestures and expressions, or other potentially significant aural and visual components of the communicative exchange – in fact, the Ellis Island transcriptions use such notations, though rather sparingly. Of course, there are aspects of the oral testimony that will not find their way into the written text, and that is why, while availing themselves of the transcript for quotations and as a useful aid for analysis, scholars should always listen to the audio version of the narratives when this is available. Ellis Island transcribers, for instance, do not render the interviewees' accent, which is, among other things, an important element of personal identity. Thus, for instance, the Scottish brogue that some of the informants who emigrated to the U.S. as adults retained is instantly grasped by the researcher who listens to the tapes, while it is not evident in the transcriptions.<sup>74</sup>

With regard to the FWP transcriptions, it is first of all to be noted that the questions posed by the fieldworkers are almost invariably concealed in the life histories. In some cases the informants' answers are separated by a blank line; in others the questions resurface as part of the speakers' replies.<sup>75</sup> The life histories may quote the words of the

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<sup>73</sup> The many quotations from the interviews provided in this work will make immediately clear to the reader the characteristics of the transcriptions produced by the Ellis Island Oral History Project.

<sup>74</sup> A way to remedy this deficiency would have been to precede the transcripts with headnotes supplying additional information on the informants and the interview.

<sup>75</sup> The deletion of the fieldworkers' questions was consistent with the notion of avoiding all intrusion on the part of the researcher to let the informants' words take centre stage. Benjamin Botkin wanted the interviewer to eliminate him or herself entirely, and the reader to be 'brought face to face with an

informants directly – contrary to the Ellis Island researchers, the FWP workers sometimes attempt to render, with controversial results (for instance, with a patronizing effect), regional and social variations of speech<sup>76</sup> – or convey them in the third person (in this case they are filtered, through indirect discourse, by the interviewer’s voice). Yet there are also narratives that combine the fieldworker’s voice with quotations from the interviewee’s story.

The transcriptions of the interviews analysed in this work give the general sense of conversational speech effectively, without surrendering too often to exaggeration or condescension: short forms, the conjugation of the verb ‘be’ in the third person singular instead of the third person plural, and the truncation of ‘ng’ endings are examples of the most widely used colloquialisms.<sup>77</sup>

Some of the FWP accounts read as essentially accurate renderings of the speaker’s words, others sound as if they were rather heavily edited. Though a few of the fieldworkers may have taken shorthand, most just relied on notes, and generally the write-up was not done until the day after the interview had been conducted, or even later. Besides, the fieldworkers’ prepared transcripts went through various stages of revision, which inevitably resulted in a “negotiated” version of the final product.<sup>78</sup> Editing was thus part of the very process of producing the FWP life histories.<sup>79</sup>

This, inevitably, has raised the issue of the amount of alteration the FWP accounts were subjected to and the related question of their authenticity and validity for historical work. Here the terms “authenticity” and “validity” refer to the faithfulness of the

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informant.’ Botkin, *Lay My Burden Down*, xii-xiii. Some examples from the FWP life histories: “‘Women in the knife shops? Oh, yes, there was about ten of ‘em over in Hotchkissville’”, Mrs. Buckingham, FWP, 1; “‘What do you think is the cause of all this unemployment? They laid off some of the fellas they hired last November. Why? Too many machines. Too much production [...]’”, Mr MacCurrie, FWP, 2. In the following passage the two answers are separate by a blank in the transcription: “‘We work eight hours a day, five days a week. That gives us forty hours a week, and my week’s pay is forty-two-fifty. It ain’t enough either, but it’s more than you can get in any other line around here’”. “‘It ain’t bad in the sheds. The noise is the worst thing. It makes me deaf. It’s a hell of a racket with the saws grinding back and forth. You know it takes an hour to saw four inches into granite [...]’”, Dave Bernie, FWP, 6.

<sup>76</sup> State and national FWP editors tried to prevent fieldworkers from clumsily rendering speech patterns and vernacular language. They suggested conveying grammar and idiom faithfully while avoiding phonetic spelling, but such advice was not always followed. Banks, *First Person America*, xxiv.

<sup>77</sup> Once again, the passages reproduced throughout this work provide ample evidence of the FWP transcribing method.

<sup>78</sup> In Virginia, for instance, editors and typists working in the Richmond office made change to some of the texts submitted by the fieldworkers through omission or other types of manipulation. Perdue and Martin-Perdue, *Talk About Trouble*, 10.

<sup>79</sup> The existence of different versions of the same narrative testifies to the fact that editors or the interviewers themselves added or deleted material, reworked some passages and changed the wording of the quotations attributed to the informant.

transcripts to the words uttered by the informants, and therefore to the possibility of using the narratives as documents illuminating, at the very least, the subjective experience of the people interviewed. The matter discussed below is thus quite distinct from the debate concerning the “objective” or “subjective” nature of historical sources and the reliability and validity of oral sources in general, which we have dwelt upon in Chapter 1.

Criticism of the life histories is often based on the fact that the interviews were not reproduced verbatim and emphasises the “creative” editing most FWP accounts allegedly went through. However, there is no solid argument that justifies discounting the life histories as little more than fictions. To begin with, it needs to be remembered that both the *Manual for Folklore Studies* and the *Manual for Social-Ethnic Studies* urged faithfulness to the words uttered by the informants. In the section devoted to the ‘Method of Recording and Submitting Data,’ the Botkin manual recommended: ‘[t]ake down everything you hear, just as you hear it, without adding, taking away, or altering a word or syllable. *Your business is to record, not to correct or improve.*’<sup>80</sup> The *Manual for Social-Ethnic Studies* referred to the *Folklore Manual* for matters related to the interview technique and the submission of data,<sup>81</sup> and the handbook for the collection of southern life histories also invited fieldworkers to be accurate when reporting the letter as well as the spirit of the narrators’ testimonies.<sup>82</sup> Finally, the guidelines issued locally adopted a similar approach. For example, Part I of the Connecticut manual for the study of the experience of first and second-generation immigrants – ‘Instruction to Field Workers for Obtaining Life History data’ – reads: ‘[w]hen you feel that the information obtained from an individual is sufficient to make a complete life-history, or a definite part thereof, arrange your notes and write it up. *In writing, use the first person and, wherever possible or feasible, the exact language and expressions of the informant.*’<sup>83</sup> Though the interpolated qualifying phrase gives the interviewers some leeway, the stress is undoubtedly placed on faithfulness.

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<sup>80</sup> *Manual for Folklore Studies*, 13, emphasis in the original.

<sup>81</sup> ‘For methods of interviewing, recording, and submitting data by field workers, see the Manual for Folklore Studies. These instructions should be followed specifically in collecting folklore data, but should be generally applied in all interviewing in connection with social-ethnic studies.’ *Manual for Social-Ethnic Studies*, 10-11.

<sup>82</sup> ‘Insofar as possible, the stories should be told in the words of the persons who are consulted. [...] [The writer] must try to discover the real feeling of the person consulted and must record this feeling regardless of his own attitude toward it. Any story in which this principle is violated will be worthless.’ *Manual for the Collection of Southern Life Histories*, 418. Both the *Manual* and the three-page outline for life histories are reproduced in Couch, *These Are Our Lives*, 417-21. Page reference is to Couch’s volume.

<sup>83</sup> *A Field Workers’ Manual*, Part I, 2, emphasis added.

As is the case with the list of questions, the general rules and precepts specified in the national manuals were not systematically applied in the field, either because the workers did not receive the instructions or because, when they did, they failed to follow them to the letter. However, the guidelines provided by state offices and local supervisors were inspired by the manuals produced nationally and tended to adhere to its fundamental principles, though often being a simplified version of them. Sometimes, it is worth noting, the opposite could be true, as in the case of the Connecticut State Office *Field Workers' Manual*. This, as has already been pointed out, featured a very detailed and well-thought out interview questionnaire section which, if followed, would have enabled the most inexperienced of workers to gather plenty of information on many aspects of the immigrants' experience.<sup>84</sup>

In any case, whatever the guidelines the fieldworkers had at their disposal, changing systematically the words of the people interviewed would have meant betraying the very political and intellectual core of the FWP life history collection venture, a state of affairs difficult to imagine. It is much more likely that, normally, the editing process did not change radically neither the content nor the form of the conversations. Actually, the interviews with British immigrants examined in this work seem to confirm this hypothesis, just as most of the narratives reproduced in published works so far do.

Admitting that the life histories underwent a complex editing procedure, which often involved various stages of revision and the intervention of more than one person, does not entail that a "fictional", "idiosyncratic" kind of emendation took place or was aimed for by the FWP fieldworkers and officials. Creative editing was the exception, not the rule. In short, the FWP attempted to cogently convey the essence and the significant elements of the informants' words, and the changes they made to the texts were meant to attain this goal. As Jerrold Hirsch remarks, sometimes the FWP editors

sought only to illuminate the interviewers' comments. On other occasions they suggested that the material be rearranged for greater clarity or placed in a conventional chronological order, regardless of whether that violated the actual order of the interviewee's testimony. On occasion an editor, with the approval of the original interviewer, altered the quoted remarks of a subject. [...]

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<sup>84</sup> Part IV of the *Field Workers' Manual*, entitled "A Guiding Outline for Obtaining the Life Histories of Immigrants of the First and Second Generations," is 15 pages long; pages 2-10 are reserved for questions to be asked of first-generation immigrants, pages 11-15 for questions about the life of second-generation ethnics. The Connecticut officials had taken seriously the advice given in the prefatory note of the Royse handbook, which invited supervisors to tailor outlines and instructions to local conditions and use such outlines and instructions 'to supplement the manual.' *Manual for Social-Ethnic Studies*, 2.

Though the editing constitutes evidence that some interviews are inauthentic *in detail*, it would be a mistake to assume that FWP officials were indifferent to this issue. Some went to great length to ensure that the texts accurately reflected what was said in the interview.<sup>85</sup>

Besides, the “creative” transformation of the life histories was not an easy task to perform for the FWP workers because, as we have seen, the actual professional writers employed by the agency were few: consequently, most of the interviewers must have found it easier just to repeat the words of the informants. In Alabama, for instance, ‘the accounts tend to be pedestrian in prose but correspondingly simple and straightforward in description, right down to the point of enumeration – a list of farm tools, a list of pantry supplies. *Lack of literary sophistication in this case seems to lead more to factual accuracy than to creative fiction.*’<sup>86</sup> Furthermore, not all the texts underwent the same amount of editing. For example, the Connecticut narratives were not subjected to much revision,<sup>87</sup> and the same applies to the Virginian life histories, which were comparatively closer to the letter of the original conversations than some other testimonies collected by the FWP Southeastern Regional Office.<sup>88</sup>

In any case, the practice of editing and the concept of validity should be kept separate, since there is no automatic correlation between the substantial intervention of an editor and the validity of a document. This is one of the main issues discussed in the well-known article by Leonard Rapport questioning the validity of the FWP interviews and in the replies elicited by his criticisms.<sup>89</sup> Despite referring specifically to the production of the southern narratives, the observations made by Rapport and the counter-arguments advanced by Tom Terrill and Jerrold Hirsch are relevant to the generality of the life histories.

Rapport, an ex-staff member of the Southern Regional Writers’ Projects, points to the heavy editing some testimonies were subjected to in order to cast doubt on all the

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<sup>85</sup> Hirsch, *Portrait of America*, 157.

<sup>86</sup> Brown, *Up Before Daylight*, 15, emphasis added.

<sup>87</sup> With regard to the Connecticut narratives Laura Anker observes that, ironically, ‘decreasing funding and the precipitous demise of the ethnic survey meant that life histories suffered little alteration from the complex process of editing and censorship that normally preceded publication.’ Anker, “Immigrant Voices from the Federal Writers’ Project,” 282.

<sup>88</sup> ‘By chance of the programmatic differences between Richardson’s VWP and Couch’s southern life history project – that is, the late timing of the VWP life history efforts and, consequently, the lack of any resulting publication from them, and the lack of firm directions from the Richmond office, which set fieldworkers free to write in their own communities and among their own people pretty much as they saw fit – the Virginia Writers’ Project life histories escaped some of the larger-scale emendations suffered by *These Are Our Lives* and survived more or less intact.’ Perdue and Martin-Perdue, *Talk About Trouble*, 11.

<sup>89</sup> Leonard Rapport, “How Valid Are the Federal Writers’ Project Life Stories: An Iconoclast Among True Believers,” *Oral History Review* 7 (1979), 6-17.

accounts produced by the FWP Unit in which he worked. He regrets the technological deficiencies of the Thirties, notes that the interview instructions were not adequately followed and, above all, underlines the fact that the fieldworkers were too willing to play an “artistic” role:

Looking back, it might have been different if we had tape recorders. Assuming tapes survived we would at least have known what people said.

Looking back, I don't believe that writers – people certified by the relief agencies as writers – were the best people for life stories. Persons who consider themselves writers, or who are told they are writers, in their heart of hearts begin to think of themselves as creative writers, and most likely, in the innermost adytum, potential fiction writers. They do not want to be court reporters.<sup>90</sup>

First of all, Terrill and Hirsch observe, Rapport mistakenly ‘thinks that if some of the FWP life histories cannot be trusted then none can.’<sup>91</sup> They admit that ‘*sometimes* the editing went beyond any standards that oral historians today would find acceptable,’<sup>92</sup> but they also argue that the interviews can be profitably used once scholars become thoroughly aware of the methods employed to collect them. More importantly, they point out that Rapport simplistically connects accuracy and validity with verbatim transcription, a notion which is too rigid and seriously deceptive, and that he ‘has little idea of the numerous questions these materials could help scholars address and therefore his assessment of their validity is unimaginative and inadequate.’<sup>93</sup> In sum, Rapport’s remarks constitute

neither a valid assessment of the life histories themselves nor an accurate judgement of the scholars interested in them. Significant aspects of Rapport’s article are, at best, misleading. His characterization of scholars interested in these materials is neither fair nor true. He generalizes about a collection of over 1,000 interviews covering more than 15,000 pages on the basis of a limited knowledge. Nor does he demonstrate much familiarity with the extensive Project correspondence dealing with the editing of the life histories and the abilities of various interviewers.<sup>94</sup>

Ultimately, what is called for is an adequate knowledge of the sources and a critical reading of them based on such knowledge. It is the skill with which scholars handle the FWP life histories that determines their validity, and this would also apply if the

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>91</sup> Tom E. Terrill and Jerrold Hirsch, “Replies to Leonard Rapport’s ‘How Valid Are the Federal Writers’ Project Life Stories: An Iconoclast Among True Believers,’” *Oral History Review* 8 (1980): 81.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 86, emphasis in the original.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 85. Hirsch reiterates this observation almost a quarter of a century later: ‘[m]ost of the FWP oral histories fall short of a verbatim account. The danger of posing the question of authenticity in either/or terms is that it creates a false dichotomy that can only lead to a simplistic acceptance or rejection and an equally simplistic use of the materials.’ Hirsch, *Portrait of America*, 157.

<sup>94</sup> Terrill and Hirsch, “Replies to Leonard Rapport,” 85.

interviews had been tape-recorded.<sup>95</sup> The foregoing, of course, does not only concern the FWP interviews; indeed, historians always need to become aware of the context of production of the documents they are using. The “raw” materials researchers use are not raw at all: all documents are mediations, they are produced by human agents who make selections, alterations, mistakes, and are subject to pressures and constraints.

In fact, despite their weaknesses, a substantial amount of historical knowledge can be derived from the FWP testimonies. These are fascinating documents which illustrate the impact of historical and cultural forces on individual lives. The observations made by Nancy Martin-Perdue and Charles Perdue about the material collected in Virginia can be easily generalized: the FWP histories ‘capture significant moments and relations in time, describe ways of doing things or social and economic processes at work in the past, and have the power to move and inform us. These texts are also rare sources of testimony about tangible distinctions between people and about change.’<sup>96</sup>

Finally, a few words need perhaps to be spent on the “mood” of the Federal Writers’ Project interviews, given the historical context in which they were produced, that of the Great Depression. Of course, the mood expressed in the single interviews can vary significantly. What is being discussed here is the general spirit conveyed by the collection of life histories based on the informants’ words, i.e. the mood that often colours the informants’ accounts. This surfaces quite clearly, also because the fieldworkers were invited to adopt a speaker-oriented approach during the interview, as has been noted.

Divergent critical interpretations have been provided on this issue. Ann Banks, for instance, was struck by the optimism, the trust in a better future and the few traces of despair surfacing in the informants’ words.<sup>97</sup> In this connection she observes that, although the years 1938 and 1939 were a period of recession, ‘the harshest Depression years had passed by the time [the FWP narratives] were collected.’ Furthermore, for the people interviewed the Depression ‘was one more hardship in lives made difficult by immigration, world war, and work in low-paying industries before the regulation of wages and hours.’<sup>98</sup> By contrast, Bruce M. Stave and John F. Sutherland maintain that the Connecticut life histories portray ‘desperate years, when the Great Depression was challenging fundamental assumptions about the viability of American industrial

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<sup>95</sup> Terrill and Hirsch, “Replies to Leonard Rapport,” 87.

<sup>96</sup> Perdue and Martin-Perdue, *Talk About Trouble*, 11-12.

<sup>97</sup> Banks, *First Person America*, i.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, xii.

capitalism. Many of these first- and second-generation immigrants saw their hopes and dreams disintegrate during these years. Their recollections have a sharp and sometimes bitter edge [...]. Their voices resonate with the timbre of the Great Depression.’<sup>99</sup>

While Banks seems to overemphasize the positive spirit of the FWP interviews, Stave and Sutherland perhaps unduly stress the negative side of the informants’ representation of their experience. No doubt the reality and atmosphere of the Depression emerge in the FWP accounts, yet the picture is not so unrelentingly gloomy as the authors of *From the Old Country* indicate. The rich volume edited by Nancy Martin-Perdue and Charles Perdue Jr. on the life of Virginians in the 1930s conveys a different impression of the predominant mood of the FWP narratives. By its very title, *Talk About Trouble*, this book reveals that the informants’ stories dwell upon the difficult times people were going through when the fieldworkers interviewed them. Yet their accounts offer a broader description of their existence: ‘Virginians of another era “talk about trouble” and also relative well-being, about the complexities of their lives and experiences, and about coping with profound economic and sociocultural change in the throes of the Great Depression.’<sup>100</sup> Indeed, the interviews analysed in this work seem to confirm this latter picture. In general, the FWP interviews with British immigrants reflect the attitude of working-class people grappling with hard times with a down-to-earth, practical spirit, a sense of disillusionment but not of despair. This general mood might not only have been influenced by the fact that the worst phase of the Depression was over when the informants were interviewed, but also that they were living in a time in which many were benefiting from the policies implemented by the Roosevelt administration; actually, the interviewees themselves were living proof of the fact that the New Deal alleviated poverty and kept hope alive.

Unlike the FWP researchers, the Ellis Island oral historians have adopted an interviewing method which stands between the two extremes of the free-flowing dialogue and the rigidly structured, “objective” questionnaire, tending towards the structured pole of the continuum.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Stave and Sutherland, *From the Old Country*, xiii.

<sup>100</sup> Perdue and Martin -Perdue, *Talk About Trouble*, 1.

<sup>101</sup> The observations made here on the thematic structure of the Ellis Island interviews and their ideological bias are based on sections of the following paper, to which the reader is referred for further information: Mario Varricchio, “Golden Door Voices. Towards a Critique of the Ellis Island Oral History Project,” *Oral History Forum d’histoire orale* 31 (2011): 1-28.



As we have seen in Chapter 1, oral sources are ultimately the result of the interaction between interviewers and interviewees, and therefore the form and substance of the Ellis Island reminiscences (as well as of the FWP life histories, of course) have been determined not only by the fieldworkers but also by the informants, and by the relationships which were established between them. Nevertheless, as has been pointed out, the content and thematic development of an interview is significantly affected by the approach of the fieldworker (the detailed advice oral history handbooks give on how to conduct an interview is, by itself, proof of this).

An interview outline, organized into several broad chronological sections, was drawn up for the Ellis Island Series oral history project.<sup>102</sup> The sections encompass the main phases of the emigration experience as they have commonly come to be defined in historical studies: a) the pre-emigration phase: life in the country of origin and reasons for departure; b) the move overseas: the voyage, arrival and processing at the port of entry; c) the post-emigration phase: life in the immigrants' land of adoption. More precisely, the interview outline is divided into seven sections: "The start and the old country" and "Coming to America" cover the period before emigration, the decision to leave and the preparation for the trip; "The voyage", "Statue of Liberty" and "Ellis Island" focus on the move overseas; "Life in America" deals with the emigrants' experience in the United States; finally, in the "Conclusion" informants are often invited to assess their decision to migrate and compare the Old World with the New (cf. Appendix II).<sup>103</sup> The interviews cover a rather large number of subjects but, as a norm, are not meant to exceed one hour in length. Rarely, therefore, are the topics of conversation dwelt upon.

The fieldworkers tend to apply the interview outline faithfully, especially in the sections devoted to the pre-emigration and emigration/arrival phases of the emigrants' venture. They ask informants a common set of questions in the same order, thus producing a corpus of easily comparable narratives which present a large core of recurrent general and specific themes and unfold in a usually predictable sequence.

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<sup>102</sup> *Ellis Island History Project Interview Questions*. Revised by Paul E. Sigrist Jr., March 1993. United States Department of the Interior. National Park Service. Ellis Island Oral History Project, New York Statue of Liberty/Ellis Island National Museum.

<sup>103</sup> The older interviews that have been used in this study present a broadly similar structure to the EI Series accounts: in all of them the immigrants are asked a standard set of questions, including their origin, the reason why they moved to America, what they went through during the voyage and what subsequently happened to them. Coan, *Ellis Island Interviews*, xxiv.

As Alessandro Portelli has pointed out, ‘rigidly structured interviews may exclude elements whose existence or relevance were previously unknown to the interviewer and not contemplated in the question schedule. Such interviews tend to confirm the historian’s previous frame of reference.’<sup>104</sup> Indeed, the systematic approach adopted by the Ellis Island fieldworkers ensures comparability, but it is certainly not the most suitable method for digging up “unexpected” information. It is, instead, bound to generate similar sets of responses. The Ellis Island researchers do not aim for, or in any case are not able to establish, a “thick dialogue” with their informants, one in which the questions ensue dialectically from the answers.<sup>105</sup>

The formulaic character of the interviews is not the only flaw of the Ellis Island oral history project. The main one, which is in part related to the rigid application of a less than adequate question list, is its celebratory slant, based on an uncritical acceptance of the American dream myth.

The essence of the Ellis Island oral history programme emerges clearly from the general thematic structure of the interview guidelines, which translates into the subjects fieldworkers explore (and consequently the topics normally informants discuss in their testimonies) as well as in the interviews’ “silences”. In other words, the question list obviously reveals what the fieldworkers deem worth investigating and what, on the contrary, they consider irrelevant or of only secondary importance.

One of the first things that strikes attention is that the Ellis Island oral histories devote more space to the description of the informants’ experiences *before* they entered America than to portraying their life in the New World. This is evident from the difference in the number of questions reserved for the three main phases of emigration in the interview outline. Though there is no direct correlation between the number of questions asked about a given topic and the time informants may spend discussing it, the question list the Ellis Island fieldworkers decided to use clearly indicates how much weight they intend each of the sections (indeed, each of the topics) to have in the general structure of the interview (for details see Appendix II).

On average, only a little more than a third of the interviews deal with the informants’ life after they get through Ellis Island. Apparently, therefore, the fieldworkers were

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<sup>104</sup> Portelli, “What Makes Oral History Different?” 54.

<sup>105</sup> In fact, interviews ‘can shift from a one-way *questionnaire* to *thick dialogue*, according to how much space questions allow for the answers, and to the way in which the answers act upon the questions.’ Alessandro Portelli, “Oral History as Genre,” in Id. *The Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 11.

more interested in knowing who the emigrants were, what they did in Great Britain and why they moved, as well as in the passage to the New World and through the Golden Door, than in finding out what became of them in America or how they lived there, albeit not neglecting this side of the emigrants' experience. This is undoubtedly connected to the obvious emphasis put by the Ellis Island researchers on the portrait of the people who passed through the immigrant depot's facilities and on the scrutiny to which newcomers were subjected once they set foot on the island. Yet the form and content of the narratives is also affected by the ideological stance underpinning the project.

In fact, the difference between the amount of space devoted to life in the U.S. and the pre-emigration and emigration stages becomes at times even wider in the actual production of the interviews. Indeed, some of the questions included in the list that would have yielded potentially illuminating answers on the experience of newcomers in America (concerning their jobs, for instance) are far from systematically asked or just passed over. Perhaps this also happens because the fieldworkers aim for recordings which are less than one hour long, as we have noted (though some interviews run longer, or shorter, than that), and thus may decide to deal quickly with or even skip topics of conversation towards the end of the interview, when they are "running out" of time. This remains consistent with the project's emphasis on immigrants' departure and arrival rather than permanence in the United States.

In order to adequately investigate the last stage of the emigration experience far longer interviews should have been conducted; possibly, two different recording sessions would have produced an even better result, with the second interview entirely reserved for the description of life in the country of adoption. Yet the fieldworkers deal with the script of the immigrants' story after arrival cursorily, as if it was, in essence, already known, and thus not worth repeating. In fact, the fieldworkers seem to take for granted that immigrants had a positive experience in the new country, that they achieved a satisfactory degree of success and economic improvement, or made good, in America, and that this was something they could not have attained in their native land. Thus, in their very structure, the Ellis Island interviews buttress the popular saga of the immigrant who, reasonably quickly, finds freedom, opportunity and material success in the United States.

The section devoted to immigrants' life in America is characterized by many glaring "silences" – the term "silences" here refers to the questions researchers do not ask rather

than to the topics informants are reluctant to talk about or unconsciously censor.<sup>106</sup> Important topics such as the difficulties emigrants normally encounter once they find themselves in a new country and that accompany them at least in the first period of their new life are not probed. Subjects such as the complexity of the individual or family economic arrangements, the harshness of work and living conditions, the possibly strained relations at home and in the workplace are overlooked or barely touched upon. Noticeable, as we shall see in Chapter 5, is also the scarce attention paid to the Depression decade, which had a dramatic impact on American society, particularly on the less privileged. Though all of the informants lived through those difficult times, no question about this period is included in the interview outline. Moreover, in the few cases in which the subject enters the conversation, it is not adequately investigated.

The celebratory attitude of the fieldworkers is evident not only in the themes they do not probe but also in the questions they ask when they invite the informants to provide an overall assessment of their migratory experience and their decision to move, as well as in the way they respond to the informants' replies.

The "Life in America" section of the interview guidelines contains a number of queries intended to investigate the adjustment of the informant's family members and their degree of satisfaction with life in the new country:

Describe how your family members (i.e. mother, father, grandparents, etc.) adjusted to life in America? Did anyone return to live in their country of origin? If so, why? Was your family satisfied or dissatisfied with life in America? Describe the individual adjustments of your father and your mother.

These are *not* leading questions, and it is perhaps not by chance that the replies of some informants reveal the ill-adjustment of their parents and provide a negative evaluation of their decision to leave, as we shall see in Chapter 6. Yet, it must be stressed that the above-quoted questions are *not* systematically posed. Indeed, often the fieldworkers limit themselves to inquiring about the adjustment of the informant's parents, and sometimes they do not even do that.

The most important questions in the accounts about the immigrants' experience in America are bound to be those posed to the informants themselves. The opening of the "Conclusion" section of the interview guidelines reads: 'Are you happy you came to America? Were your parents (or other pertinent family members) happy they chose to

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<sup>106</sup> On the various kinds of omissions that can be detected in oral histories cf. Naomi Norquay, "Identity and Forgetting," *Oral History Review* 26, 1 (Winter/Spring 1999): 2-3.

come to America?’ It is not clear why a question about the informant’s parents’ opinion of emigration should be asked once again. At any rate, at the close of the interview the fieldworkers normally only solicit the informants’ own assessment of their move to America and they do it almost always, as a suitable way to wrap up the conversation. Instead of repeating the guidelines question literally the fieldworkers sometimes ask the informants if they are glad that their parents made the decision to leave, or other questions which take a positive assessment of the emigration experience for granted, as in the following case: ‘Sigrist: “What did you like about America the most? What was the most wonderful thing about America, the thing that you liked the absolute most?”’<sup>107</sup> One wonders why the fieldworker should not have also enquired about what the informant *disliked* about America, aiming for a more balanced portrait of the interviewee’s experience in the U.S., or why a more neutral question could not be posed.

The very positive assessment of America to be found in the interviews can thus partly be explained by the fact that the informants said what they perceived was “appropriate” in that context, responding to the approach of the fieldworkers as well as, more generally (but the two things are linked), to the public image of Ellis Island – ‘a repository of patriotic sentiment’ Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett pithily defines it – as the gateway to a free and better life for all immigrants.<sup>108</sup> As the examples below will show, in some cases not only the fieldworkers’ questions but also their comments are loaded, thus unsurprisingly eliciting answers that confirm the “superiority” of the New World compared to the Old.

Admittedly, it is also likely that many of the informants (though we cannot know how many, since the topic was not investigated in depth) shared the fieldworkers’ stance, owing to the deeply-rooted belief in the myths of prosperity and opportunity which permeates American culture. In this connection, we should not forget that most of the Ellis Island informants arrived in the U.S. as children. In short, the speakers might also have interpreted their life course through the prism of the American Dream, whose core meaning has always been the possibility offered to everybody – through individual

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<sup>107</sup> Robert Reese, EI, 44-45.

<sup>108</sup> Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture. Tourism, Museums, and Heritage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 177.

effort and spirit of enterprise – of advancing economically and socially, of achieving a high (or in any case *higher*, compared to one’s starting point) standard of living.<sup>109</sup>

The following exchange is worth quoting at length. The questions asked by the fieldworker, his comments and the opinion expressed by the informant reinforce one another:

Sigrist: Well, I have one final question for you. I want to ask you if you think that when you came to America you made the right decision?

Reese: I did, I made the right decision.

Sigrist: How do you think your life would have been different if you had stayed in Wales?

Reese: I’d have been a very poor man. I wouldn’t have a job. I’d be on the dole, or whatever they call it. There’s a lot of them people that’s out of work there now. The slate mines are not working like they used to, you know.

Sigrist: That’s a hard life.

Reese: It was a hard life. It was a hard life, yeah.

Sigrist: So you, so you’re happy you came to America.

Reese: I’m happy I came over here. It was the best thing I ever done was come over here, yeah.<sup>110</sup>

The answers informants provide when they are requested to pass a judgement on their country of adoption normally go unchallenged, as if they were self-explanatory. Consider the following examples:

Levine: [...] Okay, so let’s start with where you came from.

Libman: I came from, I was originally born in London but the family moved from London to Liverpool when I was three years of age and then we lived in Liverpool until 1923 and then we came to America. Thank God. (Morris and Janet laugh).

Levine: Okay, what is your exact birth date?<sup>111</sup>

Levine: Is there anything else that you would say about the fact of coming here, having started your life in England and really lived the greatest part of it in this country?

Dickson: Thank God. Thank God!

Levine: Okay. Well, why don’t we go now to the Coast Guard part of the story.<sup>112</sup>

The first exchange occurs at the start of the conversation and the fieldworker clearly prefers, so to speak, “to begin with the beginning”, leaving the assessment of the emigration experience to a later stage of the interview. Yet a short digression on the reasons why the informant thanked God for emigrating to America was surely worth

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<sup>109</sup> Cal Jillson discusses the main facets of the American Dream idea from its birth to the present day, defining its essential promise as one by which ‘those willing to learn, work, save, persevere, and play by the rules would have a better chance to grow and prosper in America than virtually anywhere else on earth.’ Cal Jillson, *Pursuing the American Dream. Opportunity and Exclusion over Four Centuries* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2004), xi.

<sup>110</sup> Robert Reese, EI, 48-49.

<sup>111</sup> Morris Libman, EI, 1.

<sup>112</sup> Arthur Dickson, EI, 17-18.

making. Here both the rigid application of the interview outline and the ideological bias of the project – of course the informant is grateful he left the Old World for the New, why should he not be? – combine to cut the exchange short and substitute laughing for probing. The second example is taken from the end of the informant's account of his emigration experience (the second part of the interview, in this special case, is devoted to the career of Dickson as a Coast Guard and his relationship with Ellis Island in that capacity). Once again, the informant's enthusiastic exclamation ends the exchange on the topic, as if indeed there was nothing else to say.

The opinions expressed by the interviewees are not challenged even when they clearly appear to be arguable. The excerpt from Robert Reese's testimony quoted above is certainly one of those cases, while in the following example contemporary England is described as a romantically beautiful backward country where people may lack, today just as in the past, even the basic facilities, as opposed to the comforts America offers:

Sigrist: Are you glad that your parents opted to come to this country?

Stenzel: Yes I am. I am. England is a beautiful, beautiful country. Uh, I love a lot about England when I've been there. Um, traditions in England are great, you know. Especially, the Christmas cake at Christmas time, the fruit cake with the hard white icing. I always remembered that. [...] But, um, to want to go back again to live? No. No, like my dad, I think this is my home. But being, being in England and going back again was especially great, I think, and I think you should go back. [...] I think you, you can renew a lot, and it sort of reminds you, I think it reminds you of what you have today. There are so many places in England they don't even have central heating yet, you know. There's a lot of advances, a lot of things that they're lacking yet.

Sigrist: Makes you appreciate what you, what you have.

Stenzel: It makes you appreciate what you've got.<sup>113</sup>

Among other things, the Ellis Island historians should have been aware that interviewing immigrants at the end of their life is very likely to produce a more favourable picture of the country of adoption than interviewing them, say, in the period immediately following their arrival. Since the final assessment of the informants' economic situation is, inevitably, made from the point of view of the present, in order to avoid utter banality the fieldworkers should at least have tried to investigate the various phases leading to the immigrants' financial stability as well as the human costs paid in the process and the time needed to achieve it. In addition, they should have contextualized historically the immigrants' experience in the U.S. and the life of those who remained at home by eliciting more in-depth comparative reflections between the

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<sup>113</sup> Doreen Stenzel, EI, 50-51.

Old Country and the New World at the time of interview. Yet all of this, by putting things in perspective, would have debunked the American Dream myth.

In conclusion, it is clear that various key aspects of the emigrants' life in America are overlooked in the Ellis Island interview guidelines. Likewise, not all the subjects of the interview were adequately explored by prompting informants to speak about them in sufficient detail. Indeed, the fieldworkers involved in this project could have highlighted a wider variety of shared and individual experiences as well as illuminated obscure corners of the migratory venture, but ended up by standardising accounts, leaving out or treating superficially essential aspects of the immigrants' life and embracing the oft-told tale of the fulfilment of the newcomers' hopes in America. Due to the nature of the interview outline and the way in which the interviews were conducted, the narrators who might have ended up by qualifying or even questioning the American Dream were not given a real chance to speak out.

In truth, the Ellis Island Oral History Project parallels the essential spirit and basic aims of the Ellis Island Museum, drawing on the idea of the American society as a successful melting pot as well as on an oversimplified image of the process of nation-building. In this context, the emigrants' story becomes an illuminating, perhaps the ultimate, example of the realization of the American Dream and *E pluribus unum* myths. At Ellis Island, John Bodnar observes, 'complexity is contested [...] by the narrative of nation-building. Thus, the display called "Flag of Immigrant Faces" is seen as a series of individual faces of many ethnic backgrounds when viewed from one angle but looks like the American flag when looked at from another.'<sup>114</sup> Furthermore, 'even a cursory trip through the site leaves an impression that eventually immigration was only about progress, both economical and political. [...] The possible contradictions of American capitalism are not subjects for review at this cultural place.'<sup>115</sup>

What we are saying, it is worth emphasizing, is not that the oral histories lack any evidence of the harsh realities of the emigration experience and the difficulties immigrants had to confront. Truly, Chapter 5 will provide many examples of this, revealing that the interviews tell a different story under the surface of the version of events espoused explicitly. In fact, a more realistic picture of the immigrants' life in America needs to be read between the lines and can only be obtained by piecing

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<sup>114</sup> John Bodnar, "Remembering the Immigrant Experience in American Culture," *Journal of American Ethnic History*, 15, 1 (Fall 1995): 19.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*: 17.



together evidence taken from many accounts. In other words, it emerges *despite*, rather than because of, the question list fieldworkers utilize and the way they conduct the interviews.

A final word on the analysis of the sources conducted above is in order. As already noted, oral historians utilizing interviews collected by other researchers at different times should take into account the social and historical context in which the data was collected (truly, all historians should do the same with the documents they examine). This implies that fault should not be found with interviews (and interviewers) that do not answer questions they were not originally meant to be answered. Indeed, as Joanna Bornat remarks, '[o]ne problem which secondary analysis raises is the different scope of the original data and the secondary research questions.'<sup>116</sup> Similarly, it needs to be recognized that, just as all sources are produced in specific historical contexts, the act of revisiting data is itself a historically determined social act. In this connection it is worth emphasizing that our critical observations on the FWP and Ellis Island projects is mainly based on their "internal logic", i.e. on their explicit goals, the nature of the questionnaires and interview guidelines representing the tools for achieving those goals and the way such tools were handled by fieldworkers.

Thus, as we have seen, the FWP life histories did not fully realize their potential while the Ellis Island programme essentially betrays the promise of illuminating in some detail the most important experiences emigrants had in the United States, aside from the passage through the Golden Door. In both cases, though, the flaws of the projects are compensated for by the fact that a large number of interviews were carried out. This makes it possible to cull useful historical information from the accounts taken together, on some topics more than on others.

In conclusion, the FWP narratives aimed at illuminating a large number of social and personal experiences of the informants as well as at fixing on paper their voice by subjecting it to as few filters as possible. In practice, taken a whole, they can be said to have essentially succeeded in achieving both goals, their shortcomings notwithstanding. By the same token, the Ellis Island interviews can also be fruitfully exploited by scholars – once again, despite their serious flaws – to explore a variety of aspects of the individual and collective dimensions of the immigrants' experience, and thus constitute a valuable source for tracing the history of emigration to the United States in the

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<sup>116</sup> Bornat, "A Second Take", 49.

twentieth century, British or otherwise. Hopefully, the detailed analysis of the FWP and Ellis Island oral accounts conducted in the following chapters will prove this.

## CHAPTER 3

### *Leaving Albion*

I think at that time [...] everybody immigrated, you know. Every family just had part of the family were all away, you know. And it was just part of your life. You just went. In my husband's family there were, I think, 11 or 13 of them and they nearly all went except for about three.<sup>1</sup>

[...] there was loads of work while the war was on. Ship yards were blooming. Soon as the war was finished everybody was getting laid off. There was depression in the Country. And the, everybody wanted to come to America.<sup>2</sup>

I remember in Scotland, I'd hear people singing a song. 'I know a happy land. Far, far away. Where you get ham and eggs ten times a day'.<sup>3</sup>

And we thought the streets were lined with gold, you know, and we read all the stories and it couldn't be worse than in Liverpool.<sup>4</sup>

I expected to see cowboys and Indians here. I was so surprised, you know, to have cities, these cities, big cities.<sup>5</sup>

I knew nothing about it, I didn't know, America was just a name to me, you see.<sup>6</sup>

I loved living in Scotland, and when I heard we were going to America, I didn't like it. I – I didn't want to come, but we had to come because my father couldn't find work.<sup>7</sup>

One of my sisters' husbands came to America two years before we decided to come and we had been receiving letters from her telling us of the better wages and conditions that existed in the United States. She also stated that there was a chance for us to own property which was good news to us as in England most of the land was owned by Lords, Dukes and Squires. It seemed grand to us that we could own some land and do with it the things we had always wanted to do.<sup>8</sup>

In fact, that was the reason we came to America, because after the war the government offered the returning servicemen up to five years to decide that they would relocate them to what was in their commonwealth. So my father's brother went to New Zealand. My father was coming to Canada, but my mother had a brother in the United States, in New Jersey.<sup>9</sup>

And he sent five dollars over every week to my mother and that was supposed to keep us, that five dollars because my mother works. There were all those kids to mind.<sup>10</sup>

The hardest part after the excitement of packing and planning is over is to face the fact of possible hardship and the breaking of family ties and friendships. It is almost like death must be to leave people who are dear to you knowing that you will probably never see them again, for poor people do not run back and forth across the Atlantic even if in this day and age it is not so much of a feat.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Marie Gardiner, EI, 6.

<sup>2</sup> Margaret Kirk, EI, 37.

<sup>3</sup> John Daly, EI, 14.

<sup>4</sup> Morris Libman, EI, 7.

<sup>5</sup> Phyllis Spinney, EI, 7.

<sup>6</sup> William Rogers, EI, 20.

<sup>7</sup> Agnes Fairchild, EI, 2.

<sup>8</sup> George Nunn, FWP, 1.

<sup>9</sup> Kathleen Harlow, EI, 5.

<sup>10</sup> Gladys Lambert, EI, 22-23.

<sup>11</sup> "Anonymous Scotsman", FWP, 1.

[...] we all got dressed, we picked up our little bags. And I remember going out on the street, and the neighbors' windows were open. And I remember a lot of people saying, "Goodbye, good luck." As we came up the street all the neighbors were waving and they all came out, see.<sup>12</sup>

Levine: Do you remember leaving?

Cohen: Yes, I do.

Levine: What was that like?

Cohen: Well, it makes me cry today (he is moved). My uncle Philip and several of my cousins, my Aunt Esther who got killed in World War Two, they all came to Southampton by train, and my mother cried.<sup>13</sup>

Leaving one's native country represents a turning point in a person's life and a momentous decision to make. It is not surprising, therefore, that emigration was a conscious choice and a planned move for most of the Federal Writers' Project and Ellis Island informants.

The testimonies examined in this work tell us about the motivations that spurred the emigrants to leave, the main factors on which their decision was based, the hopes they cherished before departure and the long-term strategies they devised prior to taking a step meant to transform their entire existence and that of their families. The accounts reveal the flows of information and money connecting the American to the British shores, and in general the existence of transnational networks shaping emigration from its very beginning. They also provide access to the mixed emotions of excitement and anxiety preceding the journey, and offer a glimpse of the complex practical issues emigrants needed to tackle to actualize their move.

The testimonies do not cover evenly the main aspects of the pre-emigration phase. In fact, while a significant portion of the Ellis Island interviews is devoted to this stage of the emigrants' experience, the Federal Writers Project life histories pay less attention to it. Indeed, in the "Personal History of Informant" form of the FWP *Manual for Folklore Studies* the fieldworkers are merely invited to collect information on the "place and date of birth" and "ancestry" of the interviewees.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, emigrants often only mention their nationality, year and place of birth before starting to talk about their life in the United States. By contrast, the *Manual for Social-Ethnic Studies* recognizes the importance of tracing the immigrants' experience back to their mother country, and

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<sup>12</sup> Frances Oakley, EI, 4.

<sup>13</sup> Henry Cohen, EI, 19.

<sup>14</sup> *Manual for Folklore Studies*, Federal Writers' Project, [n.p.], 1938. Library of Congress. Washington D.C. Manuscript Division, 18.

includes questions on the causes of emigration.<sup>15</sup> However, as noted in Chapter 2, most of the FWP interviews with British immigrants were conducted by the Folklore Studies Unit staff and, in any case, the manuals' directions were often ignored by workers in the field. Thus, some facets of the complex phase leading to the emigrants' departure – for example, the consideration of alternative destinations, the preparation for the trip, the feelings about the move, the farewells at the port of embarkation – are mainly or exclusively discussed in the Ellis Island oral histories.

## I. Reasons for leaving

British emigrants chose to move not only to satisfy material needs but also to respond to personal aspirations, or at least this is the way they often articulate their decision to go. However, it appears to be clear that the most important reasons triggering emigration were economic in character and that, except for very few cases, the other factors involved generally provided an *additional*, rather than an essential inducement to leave. It is also clear that the “push” factor, though normally constituting the necessary background to the move, would not have been a determinant by itself in prompting emigrants to make such a weighty decision. The magnetic pull which America exerted through the flow of information they received from various sources played a crucial role, along with the supportive networks of which potential emigrants could avail themselves.<sup>16</sup>

Scholars have demonstrated that emigrants were rarely to be found among the poorest members of the working-class.<sup>17</sup> Those who left could usually count on some resources that enabled them to undertake the trip (during which they did not earn any wages), show American officials at arrival that they possessed a certain amount of

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<sup>15</sup> *Manual for Social-Ethnic Studies*, Federal Writers' Project, [n. p.], 1938. Library of Congress, Washington D.C. Manuscript Division, US WPA Records, Container A8, 8.

<sup>16</sup> As Dudley Baines observes, economists have tended to emphasize the fact that emigrants were more responsive to income differences between the sending and the receiving countries, while historians have often pointed out the importance of the transmission of information. However, in practice these two factors are related, since the flow of information about crucial subjects such as the availability of jobs, for example, had an obvious economic relevance. In fact, it was essential for newcomers to find employment as quickly as possible in their adopted country, and thus they tended to time their journey to the conditions of the job market in America. Dudley Baines, “European Emigration, 1815-1930: Looking at the Emigration Decision Again,” *The Economic History Review*, 47: 3 (1994 Aug.), 525-29.

<sup>17</sup> John Bodnar shows that this was generally the case for immigrants of all nationalities. John Bodnar, *The Transplanted. A History of Immigrants in Urban America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 13-23.

“landing money” and meet the first expenses to settle in the new country, though they sometimes benefited from the economic assistance of relatives abroad. However, even if they were not destitute, many of the Britons who emigrated did so because of pressing economic needs, in a word because they were or were becoming poor. This is the case, for instance, with James Harris, who left England in 1883, when he apparently was only able to earn £10 a year,<sup>18</sup> or with an anonymous informant called “Captain X”. After his father’s death, “Captain X” had to leave school to help his mother support the family, and thus started working very young as an assistant cook on a fishing boat.<sup>19</sup> Thomas Sargent’s departure was also essentially due to financial straits. The post-World War I period, in fact, was proving particularly harsh for a machinist in Scotland (as well as for many other categories of workers), and his family was having difficulties in making ends meet.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, the particularly profound economic crisis in Scotland after 1921 “expelled” Jack Carnegie’s father from his native country.<sup>21</sup> The sectors worst affected by the post-war depression were shipbuilding, the iron and steel industries and the coal mines. Moreover, in some areas of the country farming and fishing were going through a period of economic malaise, and the jute industry in Dundee was also hit hard by the recession. Actually, Jack Carnegie’s father was a victim of the ‘plummeting world demand for jute after the war’.<sup>22</sup>

John Daly attributes the reason for his family’s emigration, which took place in 1929, to the onset of the Great Depression. Yet the Wall Street crash occurred at the end of that year and its effects could not have been so immediate. More likely, once again, it was the long post-war Scottish economic crisis that prompted the Dalys’ emigration. This discrepancy between reality and the account provided by the interviewee is probably due to the fact that in oral history, given the continuous restructuring of

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<sup>18</sup> James Harris FWP, 1. In 1880, “normal” wage earnings for all occupations amounted to 18 pounds a year (they were higher for skilled jobs such as engineering and coal mining). Cf. the tables listing working-class incomes from mid-nineteenth century to 1939 in John Benson, *The Working Class in Britain, 1850-1939* (London and New York: Longman, 1989), 41 and 53.

<sup>19</sup> Captain Allan Leight, FWP, 1.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Sargent, EI, 15.

<sup>21</sup> Jack Carnegie, EI, 5. Approximately 447,210 people departed from Scotland from 1921 to the end of 1930. Overseas departures accounted for about 336,000 of those leaving, with a peak of about 88,000 embarkations in 1923. In the 1920s the net emigration from England and Wales was only five per thousand, whilst for Scotland it amounted to eighty per thousand. During this decade, two-thirds of net British emigration was from Scotland. Marjory Harper, and Nicholas J. Evans, “Socio-economic Dislocation and Inter-war Emigration to Canada and the United States: A Scottish Snapshot,” *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* (Great Britain) 34, 4 (December 2006): 530; Eric Richards, *Britannia’s Children. Emigration from England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales since 1600* (London and New York: Hambledon and London, 2004), 236.

<sup>22</sup> Harper and Evans, “Socio-economic Dislocation and Inter-war Emigration,” 542.

memories in each individual's mind, informants sometimes interpret one event in the light of another which provides a more convincing explanation for their actions. Thus, John Daly conflates the post-war slump and the 1929 crash based on his hindsight knowledge of the effects of the Great Depression. Truly, some of his relatives had gone overseas before 1929.<sup>23</sup>

A number of interviewees forecast a gloomier future at home than abroad, where they thought they could put their skills and capabilities to good use. Indeed, some mention dissatisfaction with their job or working conditions, in other words bleak prospects, as the main reason for leaving. This is the case with Harry Norbury, for example.<sup>24</sup> Dissatisfaction with one's native land was normally accompanied by a sense of attraction to the New World. Actually, for a number of emigrants the lure of America seems to have been the decisive factor prompting their move. Robert Reese, for instance, did not like being a quarryman, and his parents envisaged a brighter future for him across the Atlantic<sup>25</sup>, while going to America had always been 'the one thought' in Mr "B"'s mind.<sup>26</sup> In the case of Henry Cohen more opportunities also meant the chance of attaining an education in America, rather than just a good-paying job.<sup>27</sup> Clearly, as we shall also see below, many emigrants saw the United States as a modern, mobile and meritocratic society, as a place where individuals could not only be successful in economic terms but also realize their higher aspirations, in short as the opposite of the traditional and hierarchical world they came from.

The fact of believing they would have more opportunities in America always played a crucial role in the emigrants' decision to move, particularly so when their financial conditions and prospects at home were not unsatisfactory. A few of the informants could easily have stayed in Britain, but chose to better their lot in the New World. Indeed, in their case emigration was mainly due to the pull America exerted. Edward Brown, for instance, was working as an accountant in London when he elected to leave,<sup>28</sup> while Sidney Pike's father sold his business before moving, and after only a few years in New York was able to open three bakeries in the Bronx.<sup>29</sup> Finally, the case of William Whytock is worth mentioning. He had been apprenticed and learnt the trade

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<sup>23</sup> John Daly, EI, 14.

<sup>24</sup> Harry Norbury, EI, 4.

<sup>25</sup> Robert Reese, EI, 26.

<sup>26</sup> Mr. "B.", FWP, 2.

<sup>27</sup> Henry Cohen, EI, 23.

<sup>28</sup> Edward Brown, FWP, 2.

<sup>29</sup> Sidney Pike, EI, 16.

of carver, gilder and woodworker in Edinburgh, and had prospects of gainful employment. Yet he was convinced to move to Texas by an immigration agent's subtle rhetoric: 'he made the States sound so fine, so wonderful, that we were in a hurry to start.'<sup>30</sup> Indeed, in the 1870s and 1880s some of the trans-Mississippi states – Kansas, Minnesota and Texas among them – conducted massive campaigns in Britain to attract colonizers by advertising the advantages of their lands in newspapers and posters and, above all, by employing hundreds of emigration agents.<sup>31</sup> William Whytock's case is an exception in the Ellis Island and FWP oral histories corpora, which are made up of emigrants who did not normally rely on the services of an external agency. In fact, throughout Britain the presence of emigration agents had become more and more evident in the second half of the nineteenth century. They often represented the interests of the larger shipping companies such as the White Star, Cunard, P&O and Anchor. Since they were mainly paid on commission, it is not surprising that they used a variety of propagandistic techniques (lectures, persuasive advertising, personal interviews) to entice possible emigrants.<sup>32</sup> Sometimes, as in the foregoing example, the agents also accompanied the emigrants overseas,<sup>33</sup> thus further reassuring them of the truthfulness of the information they had been provided.

Most emigrants adopted a sensible and practical approach to leaving. They viewed the United States essentially as a place where they could find a steady, better-paying job, improve their standard of living and be rewarded for their efforts. This relatively moderate, but all the same powerful and enduring version of the myth of America was based on a distrust for the possibility of self-fulfilment at home and the vision of the New World as a *better* place to live. The case of Arnold Ambler is emblematic. He decided to move despite being given a far from glowing portrait of America by a person who had already been there, which incidentally shows that sometimes people were *discouraged* from emigrating (by return migrants or otherwise). Yet, the informant did not like his job, judged his prospects in Yorkshire to be bleak, and thought that America would offer him more chances for advancement. What clearly emerges from this testimony is that America's lure was based on an essentially *comparative* element. In other words, even when it was viewed more realistically, most people still thought of

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<sup>30</sup> William Whytock, FWP, 1.

<sup>31</sup> Maldwyn A. Jones, *Destination America* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1976), 95.

<sup>32</sup> Marjory Harper, *Adventurers and Exiles. The Great Scottish Exodus* (London: Profile Books, 2003), 125-26.

<sup>33</sup> William Whytock, FWP, 2.



the United States as a land promising a rosier future: ‘[...] this Mrs. Wilson, the head of the, she said, “I’ve been to America,” very much businesslike, “I’ve been to America. You think the streets paved with gold.” She says “You’ll find your mistake.” I said, “I don’t care, it couldn’t be worse than this.”’<sup>34</sup> Moreover, the USA was seen as a land where an enterprising person could start from scratch and be the maker of one’s own destiny. As Ambler puts it: ‘Let’s start afresh and see what happens.’<sup>35</sup>

The testimony of Arthur Dickson allow us to gauge the force of the American myth. Dickson does not actually remember the reason why his family emigrated (he was too young at the time of departure). Interestingly, though, he rationalizes the decision to move by borrowing a common explanation from the collective memory, as his use of epistemic modal *must* clearly shows. The myth of America, ingrained in the social imagination, becomes a substitute for individual memory. Thus, even if life was fairly good at home, it would certainly have been better in America. In this case it also appears evident that the persistence of the informant’s mother in advocating emigration was due to the fact that she had relatives abroad with whom she wanted to reunite, that is to say that there was an emotional element involved in the act of leaving:

I, my, I had some of my relatives on my mother’s side, they came through America. And writing, they must have been writing letters back to my parents about how beautiful America was. My mother was [the] adventurous type. My father, he had a good job. He was a drum maker making instruments for the, you know, for bands. And he didn’t want to come. But, of course, my mother persevered, and we came over to America in May the 28<sup>th</sup>, 1925.<sup>36</sup>

While many emigrants held reasonable expectations with regard to life in America, others had a highly distorted vision of the New World. In fact, during the nineteenth century the myth of America as the land of plenty was fashioned and strengthened over time through many channels, and firmly implanted itself in the mind of potential emigrants. No doubt, the positive image of America was partly created by the letters received by those who had been left behind and by the cultural impact of returned migrants. Furthermore, a significant part in the construction of the myth was also played by the wealth of informative and promotional literature to which potential emigrants had access, such as guidebooks or newspapers and magazines discussing emigration

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<sup>34</sup> Arnold Ambler, EI, 8.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>36</sup> Arthur Dickson, EI, 2.

issues.<sup>37</sup> As we shall see below, the FWP and Ellis Island informants were clearly affected in their decision to move by the news coming from overseas and the stories told by those who had been in America.

A fabulous image of the United States emerges in the testimony of some of the FWP and Ellis Island informants. Whether they believed it or not, it was through such mythical image that they articulated their idea of America, in particular through the recurrent streets-paved-with-gold topos. Gladys Lambert's family, for instance, saw America through typically distorted lenses, reflecting the very positive description of it provided by some of their relatives who were already living overseas: 'Oh, we heard a lot about it. The land of plenty full of gold. Oh, because I had aunts and uncles over here.'<sup>38</sup> Once in America, reality flew in their face. Patrick Peak, for example, expected 'to pick up gold practically on the backyard lots', but then found out America was a place where one had to work hard to make a living.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, Jack Carnegie said his family 'thought there would be gold in the street', though reality proved somewhat different.<sup>40</sup> Ettie Glaser also comments on the mythical image of America circulating among potential emigrants which, she observes, was the result of delusive flow of information absorbed from afar:

Uh, and well what you hear from America when you're, when you're far away, far, far away, miles across the ocean. That America's the land of the gold. Land of opportunity and the streets are paved with gold. Those were the words that we used to hear. But, of course, it's not true. We all know that.<sup>41</sup>

In this connection we need to remember that, though more realistic or even unfavourable accounts of the conditions overseas were available to potential emigrants, their desire for a better future could operate as a selective filter and encourage them to embrace the myth. As Dick Hoerder remarks, often people at home clung to unrealistic hopes for their life in the new country, and such hopes 'turned the limited possibilities

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<sup>37</sup> The army of railway and transatlantic shipping lines agents and land companies representatives operating all over Britain also performed a crucial role – as we have seen, William Whytock was the "victim" of an agent's gift of the gab – along with the propaganda organized by most American states attempting to attract settlers to their territories. The wealth of promotional literature these produced, such as pamphlets, booklets and newspapers advertising highlighted the advantages of moving overseas and painted an embellished portrait of the emigrants' possible destinations. A convincing and detailed description of the "news of America" received by potential emigrants is provided in Philip Taylor, *The Distant Magnet. European Emigration to the U.S.A.* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1971), 66-90.

<sup>38</sup> Gladys Lambert, EI, 23.

<sup>39</sup> Patrick Peak, EI, 4.

<sup>40</sup> Jack Carnegie, EI, 6.

<sup>41</sup> Ettie Glaser, EI, 5.

for personal improvement via migration into a secular religion, into an unfounded belief in unlimited opportunity.<sup>42</sup> This inevitably clashed with reality, as the two examples above clearly show.

For the informants who emigrated as children America could also be “fabulous”, but in a different sense. Admittedly, some did not know much about the place to which they were going: William Rogers’s words quoted at the beginning of this chapter prove that America was just a name to him, and the same is true for Frances Oakley.<sup>43</sup> Yet for others the image of the New World was based upon the opposing myths of the Wild West and the dynamic metropolis. In the case of the Ellis Island interviewees this image was also being transmitted through the magic of cinema. Henry Cohen, for example, pictured America as either like Texas or New York, as a place populated by cowboys or a futuristic bustling city,<sup>44</sup> while Sidney Pike and his siblings were excited to leave because they imagined the United States to be the land of cowboys and Indians.<sup>45</sup>

Political ideals rarely feature in the emigrants’ accounts as the reason for departure. When they do, they usually represent an additional, rather than the main, motive to go. There are exceptions, however. Tom Thomazin’s father, in fact, seems to have been primarily motivated by a democratic aspiration. He deeply resented the class-based social structure in England, in particular the landowners’ attitude towards him and his workers. In this case the traditional status differences of the Old Country are implicitly contrasted with the presumed social mobility characterizing the New World:

That’s why my father left England. There a farmer was up on the top notch. His children had private teachers. Father used to go out and build on their farms. He took other men out with him. They would have father come in and eat dinner in the kitchen with the servants and the other men had to eat their lunch out in the cold and drink water out of the dikes. Father didn’t like that and sometimes he would beg of the servants to give him something to take out to the men outside. Then he would get in trouble. He thought those working for him should have the same right and privilege as he did. The other men were treated like tramps. That’s why he left England.<sup>46</sup>

Beside being imagined as the land of plenty, therefore, the United States was viewed as the land of freedom, by some emigrants more than by others. Undoubtedly, one of

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<sup>42</sup> Dick Hoerder, “From Migrants to Ethnic: Acculturation in a Societal Frameworks,” in *European Migrants. Global and Local Perspectives*, ed. Dick Hoerder, and Leslie Page Moch (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1996), 220. Thus, for some emigrants at least, the United States became a mythical land of plenty, so much so that when they moved there and ‘did not find what they had hoped to find, some continued to search for the “real” America. The dream had become more real than reality’. *Ibid.*, 220.

<sup>43</sup> Frances Oakley, EI, 3.

<sup>44</sup> Henry Cohen, EI, 17.

<sup>45</sup> Sidney Pike, EI, 1.

<sup>46</sup> Tom Thomazin, FWP, 2.

the elements constituting the myth of America in the imagination of European emigrants was the conviction that people in the New World enjoyed social equality and political democracy.<sup>47</sup>

Emigration might also be prompted by personal motives. Mr Glasson, for example, left Britain when his widowed father decided to remarry because he refused to live under the same roof with his step-mother.<sup>48</sup> Actually, as Dick Hoerder interestingly observes, key aspects of the potential emigrants' personal and social life – such as inheritance claims, impending military service or childbirth out of wedlock – could increase an individual's disposition to leave and, above all, affect the timing of departure. Indeed, many autobiographical accounts reveal a connection between emigration and the death of a family member or the remarriage of a widowed parent, as this 'imposed on the family a restructuring of established relationships. In particular, the death of a mother or the arrival of a stepmother seems to have influenced departures [...].'<sup>49</sup>

Also, sometimes it was the pull of blood ties that lay behind the emigrants' move overseas. Once most family members had relocated abroad, it might become an emotional necessity to join them there. This is what Cyril Cheeseman's parents apparently did:

I have often wondered why they came. I mean, after all, my father in his fifties and my mother was three years younger. She was probably forty-nine or fifty and why? They had been satisfied all these years in – in England. I have no idea why – why they wanted to come to this country, except to be with part of their family.<sup>50</sup>

It might also happen that emigration was the unintended consequence of human action. The case of Thomas Cowley is atypical for more than one reason. Mr Cowley was living a perfectly happy life in England, where he was earning a good salary as a mine foreman. At 51 years of age (normally, emigrants were young people or adults in the prime of life) he went to North Dakota to visit an uncle, who asked him to operate his mine while he recuperated from a serious illness. Later on Mr Cowley was

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<sup>47</sup> One of the attractions of America consisted in the fact that in the new world emigrants encountered fewer social barriers: men 'did not have to doff their caps when asking for a job, and [maids] could wear elaborate bonnets, reserved back home for middle- and upper-class women'. Dick Hoerder, "From Migrants to Ethnics," 222. On the democratic essence of America see also Taylor, *The Distant Magnet*, 87.

<sup>48</sup> Mrs Glasson, FWP, 6.

<sup>49</sup> Dick Hoerder, "From Migrants to Ethnics," 218.

<sup>50</sup> Cyril Cheeseman, EI, 20.

persuaded – unfortunately, the testimony does not clarify on which grounds – to send for his family and eventually settled in America. This was something he would regret, because he had no desire to live abroad and strongly wished to return home.<sup>51</sup>

Finally, it is worth noting that the FWP and Ellis Island informants occasionally couch the story of their emigration in terms of spirit of adventure and personal will, while the prime motives behind the move – revealed by the contradiction between different elements of their account – are of a different nature. Henry Safford, for example, portrays himself as a man ‘fired with a desire for adventure and to see the world.’<sup>52</sup> Yet, on closer examination, one realizes that his decision to emigrate was consequent on his father’s death and the fact that his mother was left with the responsibility for looking after eight children. Thus, though the decision to leave is undoubtedly the result of a combination of several factors, in most cases the emigrants who mention curiosity, the wish for change and desire for adventure as the primary reasons for their departure are probably downplaying the difficulties they were encountering at home, and recasting their move as voluntary and empowering. They retrospectively reinvent the motives for their move ‘along stereotypical lines in which adventure and tradition [are] articulated at the expense of broader structural features of the economy.’<sup>53</sup> Indeed, rarely does a person undertake such a momentous act as emigration to indulge an adventurous disposition. As James Jasper rightly emphasizes, emigration is not a *normal* action: ‘it is dramatic, unsettling, and costly. Because academic researchers have stressed the “networks” through which immigrants come to the United States, including family ties and ethnic communities, they have downplayed just how traumatic an upheaval immigration can be, even for an energetic teenager.’<sup>54</sup>

## II. Deciding to go

Before departure emigrants assessed their situation at home, weighed up the information they received from abroad, and considered the risks of the move as well as the advantages they would derive from the existence of personal connections in

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<sup>51</sup> Thomas Cowley, FWP, 4.

<sup>52</sup> Henry Safford, FWP, 2.

<sup>53</sup> Angela McCarthy, *Personal Narratives of Irish and Scottish Migration, 1921-65. 'For Spirit and Adventure'* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2007), 54-55.

<sup>54</sup> James M. Jasper, *Restless Nation. Starting Over in America* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 53.

America. The positive and often idealized image they had of the New World did not push them into making rash moves. On the contrary, they made rational choices and devised sensible emigration strategies.

Whether they were primarily driven by necessity or aspirations, emigrants usually based their final decision to leave on the specific information they collected about the United States and the image of America they formed in their mind.<sup>55</sup> This was fashioned, as we have seen, through various channels of communication, such as newspapers, advertisements, word of mouth, and letters. Particularly important in this connection were the letters sent home by relatives and friends that had moved overseas, which were obviously deemed to be ‘inherently more credible, coming from known persons and including as they did a wealth of individual and local detail couched in familiar language.’<sup>56</sup> Actually, letters are by far the most frequently mentioned source of information on America in the FWP and Ellis Island oral histories.

Scholars are at odds with regard to the predominant tone of the expatriates’ correspondence. Charlotte Erickson observes that letter writers did not often encourage emigration, even when they appeared to be satisfied by their situation in the new country.<sup>57</sup> Similarly, David Gerber underlines the “cautious” character of emigrants’ correspondence, observing that letter writers pointed out both the gains and losses of their decision to leave. There was a good motive behind such prudence, which must have helped many potential emigrants to set themselves realistic goals. In fact, even when their assessment of their move was clearly positive, ‘few failed to acknowledge that emigration was not without its costs. Accuracy aside, they wished that those who might follow them and might end up having a negative experience would not blame the writer for misleading them.’<sup>58</sup> By contrast, other authors have highlighted the generally positive or even extolling character of the correspondence coming from abroad.<sup>59</sup> The

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<sup>55</sup> This was not always the case, of course. A counterexample is offered by Margaret Whittle’s testimony. She recalls that, when she left Newcastle in 1925, aged 17, she did not have much information about the U.S., aside from what she had learnt from films. In fact, she basically only knew that her sister was living there. Margaret Whittle, EI, 24-25.

<sup>56</sup> Taylor, *The Distant Magnet*, 86.

<sup>57</sup> Charlotte Erickson, *Invisible Immigrants. The Adaptation of English and Scottish Immigrants in Nineteenth-Century America* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1972), 5. Erickson also mentions three main motives for which emigrants wrote letters home: to arrange the departure of other members of the family, to ask for financial help and, finally, to report about their life in America and keep in touch with relatives. *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>58</sup> David A. Gerber, *Authors of Their Lives: The Personal Correspondence of British Immigrants to North America in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 10.

<sup>59</sup> Marjory Harper notes that letters were inescapably written by people who pursued specific objectives or might even have a hidden agenda. They mirrored the feelings and perspectives of the emigrants, who

evidence from the corpus of interviews analyzed in this work supports the latter interpretation. Indeed, the correspondence received by the FWP and Ellis Island informants seems to have invariably praised the advantages of the new country. The passage from George Nunn's interview quoted at the beginning of this chapter – 'we had been receiving letters [...] telling us of the better wages and conditions that existed in the United States' – provides a clear example of this. Another case in point is offered by the testimony of Michael Donegal, who was told that a carver would quickly make a fortune in the U.S. Interestingly, Donegal also mentions the friction with the Irish male members of his future wife's family as a factor urging him to leave, confirming the fact that those who moved often had more than one reason for doing so.<sup>60</sup>

The always-positive picture painted in the letters from America mentioned by the informants, it is worth noting, may depend on the nature of the sources, namely on the fact that in the FWP and Ellis Island interviews we hear the voice of people who eventually decided to leave for America, not the voice of those who did not move or were discouraged to move. Thus, the accounts may reflect the experience of those emigrants who mainly received good news from abroad or whose attention was struck more by the positive than the negative sides of life across the Atlantic. Indeed, the letters informants were sent may have included cautious statements but, even if this was the case, they seem not to have been heeded.

The other source of information about America which the Ellis Island and FWP interviews mention fairly often is the stories told by returned migrants. The testimony of Arnold Ambler discussed above shows how returned migrants could also provide a sceptical or even negative portrait of America. However, in most cases returnees seem to have induced the informants to leave rather than to stay. For example, Doreen Stenzel's aunt talked the informant's father into emigrating when she went back to England for a visit.<sup>61</sup> George Wray was earning a good salary for a young man in his native country. Yet the tales of his employer, an Irish grocer who had already been to the United States and wished to go back, made George form a romanticized picture of America that proved decisive in making him opt for emigration.<sup>62</sup> Finally, when Harry Norbury's uncle, who was serving in the U.S. army, visited his relatives on furlough

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sometimes wanted to impress or convince relatives at home about their success and the favourable conditions in the new land. Harper, *Adventurers and Exiles*, 239.

<sup>60</sup> Michael Donegal, FWP, 2.

<sup>61</sup> Doreen Stenzel, EI, 11.

<sup>62</sup> George Wray, FWP, 2.

during World War I, he told them about his nice home and good job overseas, two things a British working-class boy legitimately aspired to.<sup>63</sup> In this case, as often happened, word of mouth and written communication complemented each other. Actually, before leaving, the informant exchanged various letters with his uncle discussing job openings; eventually, Harry's uncle suggested that he should go to Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania, where a friend of his would help him find employment.<sup>64</sup>

This last example clearly shows that a crucial factor making many people eventually opt for emigration was the existence of personal networks. As already noted, personal connections were the most important channel through which information about life in America was obtained. In other words, it was a function of networks to provide information on the job market – particularly on the availability of specific jobs, which might be secured prior to departure – as well as on life in America in general, which aided potential emigrants to make a decision about the move. This implies recognizing a significant degree of agency and rational decision-making among the leavers. Indeed, ‘migrants often sought out well-established pathways of movement that had been shaped by particular economic and labour market conditions. In developing networks that could respond to the work made available in new places, migrants were demonstrating sensitive and rational choices.’<sup>65</sup> As we have seen above, Michael Donegal was assured he would find profitable employment in America. In fact, the information he was given turned out to be correct, since he went to work in the Vermont stone quarries, where the skills of Scottish masons were in high demand. Furthermore, Elizabeth Nimmo's recently-widowed mother knew she would be employed as the custodian of a Methodist church when she emigrated, a job that had been found by the informant's uncle living in America,<sup>66</sup> while Jennie Jacobson's father decided to leave because his brother had a successful business in Chicago and could put him to work (this was an unusual occurrence, since emigrants could seldom be directly hired by a relative).<sup>67</sup>

Along with the likelihood or virtual certainty of obtaining a job, it was the possibility of relying on kith and kin in a foreign land that proved decisive. It was easier for

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<sup>63</sup> Harry Norbury, EI, 3.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>65</sup> Enda Delaney and Donald M. McRaid, “Irish Migration, Networks and Ethnic Identities Since 1750: An Introduction”, in *Irish Migration, Networks and Ethnic Identities Since 1750*, ed. Enda Delaney and Donald M. McRaid (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), ix.

<sup>66</sup> Elizabeth Nimmo, EI, 11.

<sup>67</sup> Jennie Jacobson, EI, 3.



emigrants to muster the courage to go when they knew they would not have to face difficulties alone. Arthur Dickson's parents had relatives in the USA with whom they corresponded, and this was the ultimately determining factor for their departure, while Robert Smalley's father left not only because of the greater opportunities America offered but also because he had a brother there who paved the way for him.<sup>68</sup> Actually, normally emigrants also chose their specific destination (the state and town in America where they would relocate) on the basis of personal networks. Furthermore, as we shall also see in Chapter 5, networks were fundamental when it came to provide lodging for the newcomers, enabling them to effectively start their life abroad. One example will suffice: Millvina Dean's family chose Kansas as their destination because they had relatives and a place to stay there.<sup>69</sup> In sum, emigrants went where relatives or friends had gone before, where they were told they would find employment or where a job and a place to live had been secured for them. As Angela McCarthy observes,

[t]he guidance and presence of a range of networks of family and friends already settled abroad [...] enticed intending emigrants. These intimate connections offered critical practical assistance in the form of lodging and housing, as well as emotional succour, as apprehensive, wide-eyed newcomers confronted disorienting elements of their new homes. Likewise, these durable transnational ties [...] provided vital financial support, with migrants moving to the United States more inclined to make use of such assistance, while migrants selecting the British World claimed government subsidies.<sup>70</sup>

Once in America emigrants might move again, out of necessity or of their own free will, in search of better opportunities. The role played by networks was important in these further moves as well. For instance, it was the potential advantage deriving from personal networks that made Henry Craven choose Iowa as the place in which to take up farming – in fact, he acquired land in the vicinity of his brother's holding.<sup>71</sup> Michael Donegal and his newly-married wife had first headed for Caledonia Country, Vermont, because they had connections there.<sup>72</sup> Yet Ryegate, the place where they settled, was a disappointment to Donegal. He and his wife moved a couple of times until he received a letter from a good friend employed in Barre, VT, telling him that many Scottish cutters lived there and that the stone in the quarries of the area was of the best quality, which

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<sup>68</sup> Robert Smalley, FWP, 1.

<sup>69</sup> Millvina Dean, EI, 4.

<sup>70</sup> McCarthy, *Personal Narratives*, 224. On this see also Id., "Ethnic Networks and Identities Among Inter-war Scottish Migrants in North America," in *A Global Clan. Scottish Migrant Networks and Identities Since the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Angela McCarthy (London and New York: Tauris Academic Studies, 2006), 203-226.

<sup>71</sup> Herbert Craven, FWP, 1.

<sup>72</sup> Michael Donegal, FWP, 3.

convinced the informant to move to Barre. Finally, Henry Safford, who had gone to Toronto in the first instance, decided to proceed to Lincoln, Nebraska, where his mother's relatives lived.<sup>73</sup>

Interestingly, sometimes the information on America provided by personal connections overseas could be exaggerated or even twisted to meet the emotional needs of the people who had already left, rather than to help those who were considering going. This should not come as a surprise, since emigrants lived an emotionally transnational life that often generated homesickness and alienation, which they tried to overcome also by recreating part of their lost world in the new environment. Edward Brown, for example, was "persuaded" to leave by his brother,<sup>74</sup> while the actual reason why Ken Johnson's relatives painted a rosy picture of America emerged after the informant's move:

My dad was a carpenter who worked in a tram factory in England [...] And one of my mother's sisters, my Aunt Nell, lived in Aurora, which is near Chicago here, and her husband was my Uncle Joe who was a, is a Congregational minister. And they told my folks about how good things were over here and convinced them, uh, what it really turned out to be was my aunt was quite lonely over here.<sup>75</sup>

People normally exploited *personal*, and in particular *family*, networks in the emigration process, but there were exceptions. Ken Johnson's uncle was a Congregational minister who did not have any connection in the United States yet elected to leave when he was offered a post in America. He thus relied upon institutional, and specifically religious, networks to relocate overseas.<sup>76</sup>

The testimony of Thomas Powell encapsulates the main elements involved in the emigrants decision-making process with which we have dealt above. It illuminates the role played by information flows and networks in the phase preceding departure, and highlights the emigrants' agency in planning their move. The informant's father left Wales because he thought America would offer him more opportunities for self-fulfilment. Having relatives in the U.S. proved to be a crucial factor in his decision to go, along with the glowing portrait of America painted by his uncle in the letters he sent home and the fact that he strongly objected to his nephew ending up working in a

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<sup>73</sup> Henry Safford, FWP, 2.

<sup>74</sup> Edward Brown, FWP, 1.

<sup>75</sup> Ken Johnson, EI, 2.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 3.

quarry. Making a final decision took a rather long time, also because the informant's mother was against moving, and much 'corresponding back and forth.'<sup>77</sup>

The mention, in Thomas Powell's testimony, of lengthy discussions and intense corresponding draws attention to an important aspect of the decision-making process emigrants went through before moving, namely the discussion of the emigration option within the family. In fact, the decision to leave often took a (rather) long time to be reached, and might cause disagreement or even generate considerable tension among the members of a family, especially husband and wife. The evidence supplied by the interviews shows that, in a married couple, the final decision to go was more frequently made by the husband than the wife. In addition to social and cultural factors – men normally were the breadwinners, and saw themselves and were generally seen as the household heads – this probably also happened because men could better judge job prospects at home and abroad. Admittedly, husbands sometimes imposed their decision on their wives. Agnes Fairchild's father, for instance, decided to emigrate because he had lost his job. Both the informant and her mother followed him reluctantly, envisaging no real alternative to this course of action: 'And my mother, she – she didn't want to come either. But it was just a matter of necessity. We had to.'<sup>78</sup> Likewise, Annie Evans was clearly opposed to moving, but realized she "would have to lump it": 'He made up his mind, you know it. Oh, I said, if I was single, I'd go right back.'<sup>79</sup> Finally, as we have seen, Thomas Powell's parents pondered on the decision to leave, but this was eventually made by his father, even though the informant's mother was not convinced and did not want to abandon her family – probably, she was not convinced *because* she did not want to abandon her family.<sup>80</sup> Indeed, an element that emerges from the testimonies is that women seemed to be motivated by family ties more frequently than men, whether they advocated emigration or resisted it. In any case, they *expressed* their personal feelings about the move more frequently, while men appeared to be focussed on the necessity to assure their family financial support.

In many cases the opinion expressed by women was taken into serious account, and the decision to emigrate was made by both husband and wife together. George Wray, for example, talked things over with his wife, and eventually both members of the

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<sup>77</sup> Thomas Powell, EI, 17.

<sup>78</sup> Agnes Fairchild, EI, 20.

<sup>79</sup> Annie Evans, EI, 14.

<sup>80</sup> Thomas Powell, EI, 3.

couple were agreed on leaving.<sup>81</sup> Similarly, ‘after a month’s deliberation’, Mrs “L.” and her husband determined to go on the basis of the glowing portrait of America painted in letters they had received from friends overseas.<sup>82</sup> Ken Johnson’s parents deeply reflected on the subject because they realized emigration would represent a remarkable change in their life: ‘[d]iscussion went on for a couple of years and finally Mom and Dad decided to make the break and they were both in their early thirties at the time, decided to come over and make the big plunge and relocate in the United States.’<sup>83</sup>

Sometimes women warmly advocated emigration overseas, and their attitude proved ultimately decisive in prompting departure. Donald Roberts makes it clear that what caused his family to leave was his mother’s “prodding”<sup>84</sup>, while Patrick Peak’s mother was so determined to go that she pretended to have already booked the transatlantic passage.<sup>85</sup> As we have seen above, Arthur Dickson’s father had a good job in Britain and agreed to move only at his wife’s insistence, because she wished to join relatives in America. The case of Robert Williams’s mother is also worth mentioning. Apparently, she had lived in the USA until she was in her twenties (unfortunately, we are not told why she had “returned” to Britain), and simply deemed America had a better life to offer to her family: ‘Well, my mother, since she was born and brought up in the United States, thought that the best for us kids, my sister and I, to come to the United States for our educational purposes and all around, you see, people over there were very poor’.<sup>86</sup> Finally, just as sometimes women were “forced” to go, their strong opposition to emigration could prove decisive in making their husbands give up the idea of leaving altogether. In fact, while Vera Tanner’s father favoured emigration, her parents remained in England due to the openly hostile attitude of the informant’s mother towards the move.<sup>87</sup>

Summing up, as William Van Vugt aptly observes, ‘the process of transatlantic migration was very often a team effort between more or less equal partners. Any assumption that British women were passive in migration decisions or were reluctant

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<sup>81</sup> George Wray, FWP, 2.

<sup>82</sup> Mrs “L.”, FWP, 2-3.

<sup>83</sup> Ken Johnson, EI, 2.

<sup>84</sup> Donald Roberts, EI, 2.

<sup>85</sup> Patrick Peak, EI, 3-4.

<sup>86</sup> Robert Williams, EI, 25.

<sup>87</sup> Vera Tanner, EI, 20.

spouses, being dragged across the ocean by their more adventurous husbands, must be avoided'.<sup>88</sup>

Carefully weighing up the potential advantages of emigration to the United States might involve considering alternative destinations and, at times, moving to a different place first. The interviews offer a few examples of this dynamic process, at the end of which British emigrants opted for America. For example, Thomas Powell makes it clear that, for people living in North Wales in the 1920s, the only alternative to going overseas was “internal” migration to English cities such as London or Liverpool, where young men ‘could go down and get into the rat race.’<sup>89</sup> Actually, the informant’s father had lived in Liverpool for a while before returning home, changing strategy and deciding on emigration to the U.S. Once established that moving abroad represented a better option, the choice had to be made between possible destinations overseas. Thomas Powell’s father ruled New Zealand out, despite having relatives there, because it was too distant, and he wanted to have the possibility of returning to his native land for visits, if not permanently.<sup>90</sup> Indeed, the emigrants who chose to move to Australia, New Zealand and South Africa in this period knew that they were in all probability severing their ties with Britain – the post-World War II era of transoceanic flights and relative prosperity that made travel easier was yet to come. The geographical location of the Antipodes would have made it difficult for them to return home and discouraged a visit to friends and relatives. Thus, emigrants needed to have very good reasons to leave for such distant places. After the Empire Settlement Act was passed, in 1922, a sound economic motive for emigrants to choose one of the Empire destinations over the United States was the possibility of being the recipient of an assisted passage ticket.<sup>91</sup>

As the above-mentioned case shows, the desire to maintain a connection with the native country played a significant part in the emigrants’ choice of destination, since

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<sup>88</sup> William E. Van Vugt, *British Buckeyes. The English, Scots, and Welsh in Ohio 1700-1900* (Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 2006), 48.

<sup>89</sup> Thomas Sargent, EI, 18.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 15-16.

<sup>91</sup> Indeed, ‘[a]ccess to an assisted passage was probably the most determining influence in a migrant’s decision where to go, all other factors being equal.’ Angela McCarthy, *Personal Narratives of Irish and Scottish Migration*, 71. The Empire Settlement Act ‘made provision for the British government to spend up to three million pounds a year for fifteen years on loans and grants for assisted passages, land settlement schemes, training courses and other approved ventures in partnership with dominion governments or with public and private bodies in Britain or the dominions. [...] Between May 1922 and March 1936 a total of 405,230 people – 36 per cent of all empire migrants in that period – left the British Isles under the auspices of the ESA, at an overall cost to the government of £6,099,046’. Marjory Harper, *Emigration from Scotland between the Wars. Opportunity or Exile?* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 16-17.

many of them evidently took for granted the transnational character of their future life. Along with distance, the decisive factor in Thomas Powell's final decision seems to have been, once again, the rosy picture of America his brother painted in his letters home.<sup>92</sup>

The balance tilted in favour of America also in the case of Ellen Pierce's family. They had connections in both Australia and the U.S., but ultimately chose America because of the information they received through correspondence. The negative sides of relocation to Australia – particularly the dangers of living in the wilderness – played a role in making the informant's parents direct their attention to an alternative destination:

And, uh, so we thought we were going to go to Australia. But then my friend wrote, one of our neighbors wrote and said they went in the bedroom to check on the baby and a big snake was on the curtain. So after my folks read that letter we started hearing more about America because my uncle, who was a minister, Reverend John Clayton, baptized me in England and then moved to America, so he kept writing and telling us. And then another cousin moved to America and married an American man, and she kept writing and telling us about it.<sup>93</sup>

Above all, the final decision of Ellen Pierce's parents was based on what they heard from one of the informant's uncles who was paying a visit home. Ellen's uncle, in fact, emphasized the better economic conditions and greater education opportunities in the U.S., and affirmed that children would not have to work in America.<sup>94</sup>

Some of the interviewees actually chose an alternative overseas destination, namely Canada, before moving to the United States. A variety of motives lay behind this choice: along with the key role played by emigration agents in conducting sustained publicity campaigns, the most important were the fact that Canada was part of the "British" world and that at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries it offered better chances of land ownership.<sup>95</sup> Only after a period there did the informants decide to continue their journey south of the border. Unfortunately, the testimonies rarely clarify why they did so, the most likely reasons being the dissatisfaction at their conditions in Canada, the lure of America and the existence of family connections there. In 1856 Alex Russell's family left Scotland for Ontario, and "Dad" Rydell had also

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<sup>92</sup> Thomas Powell, EI, 19.

<sup>93</sup> Ellen Pierce, EI, 15.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>95</sup> Marjory Harper, *Emigration from North-East Scotland. Vol. I. Willing Exiles* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1988), 346. Until 1907 more British emigrants went to the United States than to Canada, yet from about 1880 to the First World War Canada attracted a growing number of emigrants from Britain as a whole. Ibid., 346.

opted for Canada first.<sup>96</sup> In 1888 Mrs Whittington's family chose Quebec, only to settle in Vermont the following year; likewise, Henry Safford stayed in Canada about a year before proceeding south to the United States. Apparently, he had initially moved to British North America because a friend of his had extolled the virtues of Canada.<sup>97</sup>

As the foregoing has clearly demonstrated, British emigrants carefully pondered over their decision to leave. Equally rational was the way in which they actuated the process of relocation overseas. The following section illustrates that this was arranged so as to minimize risks for the members of the family moving abroad and guarantee the economic security of those left behind.

### **III. Patterns of emigration**

The FWP and Ellis Island oral histories reveal only a slight difference in the emigration patterns followed in the two core periods covered by the accounts, the 1870s-1880s and 1900s-1920s decades. As we shall see, examples of family emigration are slightly more numerous in the FWP life histories. Actually, while in the middle of the nineteenth century it was still more common for family parties to leave together, later on emigration became, increasingly, essentially an individual venture.<sup>98</sup> This does not mean, of course, that emigrants usually travelled alone. Indeed, whenever it was possible to do so, they chose to face the difficulties of the journey with relatives, for obvious reasons. And when they were not accompanied by relatives they shared the pleasures (if any) and pains of the trip with friends or acquaintances, as was the case with Kyffin Williams and Robert Reese, for instance.<sup>99</sup>

Though there were several variations in the pattern, it was normally young adults, males more often than females, who departed first and then brought other members of the family over (their wife and children in the case of married men, their siblings as well as, sometimes, their parents in the case of emigrants who were single), after having secured an adequate means of livelihood, found a house for them to stay and saved enough money to cover or partly cover the travel expenses of those who had remained

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<sup>96</sup> Alex Russell, FWP, 1; "Dad" Rydell, FWP, 7.

<sup>97</sup> Mrs Roland Whittington, FWP, fieldworker's notes; Henry Safford, FWP, fieldworker's notes.

<sup>98</sup> With regard to English emigrants, Charlotte Erickson notes that 'in the late 1880s males traveling alone or with friends outnumbered those in family groups by eight to one.' Charlotte Erickson, "English," 319-336, in *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*, ed. Stephan Thernstrom (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1980), 326.

<sup>99</sup> Kyffin Williams, EI, 30; Robert Reese, EI, 30.

in Britain. In other words, if the move had been successful emigrants were joined by (the) other members of their family, gradually or by all of them together. Indeed, as Eric Richards remarks, using savings to send out young and healthy migrants who would then remit cash to pay for the passage of their relatives is a classic strategy of proletarian emigration.<sup>100</sup> In fact, the remittances newcomers usually sent home served various purposes.<sup>101</sup> They were used to support the emigrants' family in the Old Country, to finance the journey of their relatives (as we have noted), and to pay back the money that had been pooled to enable them to move overseas.<sup>102</sup> Archibald Webster, for instance, sent his family in England twenty dollars a week. Jack Carnegie also remitted cash to his relatives in Scotland, while Robert Reese gradually returned his parents the money they had lent him before departure.<sup>103</sup> Adult emigrants who did not move with their family were able to send remittances home also because they stayed with relatives or lived as boarders in America, which made it possible to cut expenses and save money. This is the case with Myrtle Berlinghoff's father, for instance, who only rented a room in the U.S. in order to remit money home.<sup>104</sup> Emigrant families evidently functioned as rational units carefully managing resources to attain their objectives. Indeed, as scholars have conclusively proved, it was usually the family rather than the individual migrant that made decisions in its economic interest.<sup>105</sup>

Young married men typically moved first, as we have noted, followed by their wives and children. This was the case, for example, of Archibald Webster's father.<sup>106</sup> Likewise, Frances Oakley's father came out, leaving his little daughter and pregnant wife at home. Only after delivery did his wife, daughter and new-born baby join him in America.<sup>107</sup> In a similar situation, Jennie Jacobson's father acted differently. Once again, understandably, childbirth at home seemed a wiser choice. Yet he decided to emigrate with his children, leaving only his pregnant wife behind. There must have been a good reason for this, which unfortunately the interview does not explain (perhaps his wife did not live close enough to relatives in Britain who could help her taking care of

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<sup>100</sup> Richards, *Britannia's Children*, 167.

<sup>101</sup> There could be exceptions, of course. As the case of Annie Evans shows, sometimes emigrants did not earn enough to send money back home, at least for a while (Annie Evans, EI, 21).

<sup>102</sup> On the main purposes of remittances see Baines, Dudley. "European Emigration, 1815-1930", 533.

<sup>103</sup> Robert Reese, EI, 27.

<sup>104</sup> Myrtle Berlinghoff, EI, 13.

<sup>105</sup> James Jackson, Jr. and Leslie Page Moch, "Migration and the Social History of Modern Europe", 52-69, in *European Migrants. Global and Local Perspectives*, edited by Dick Hoerder and Leslie Page Moch (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1996), 57.

<sup>106</sup> Archibald Webster, EI, 6.

<sup>107</sup> Frances Oakley, EI, 3.



the children, or there was somebody in America who could do so more easily). A few months later the informant's mother and the newborn baby reunited with their family across the ocean.<sup>108</sup> Finally, Ann Nelson's father left for America with two of the informant's aunts. The reason for their move, as Nelson clearly and concisely states, was 'to get a job and establish a home for us. So they came those few months before we did.'<sup>109</sup>

When parents had passed the prime of life it was the older brothers and/or sisters who led the way, often in the company of other siblings. Over time, they would bring some or all of their siblings to America, and perhaps their parents as well. Thomas Muir, for example, departed when he was 18 with his older brother,<sup>110</sup> while Henry Cohen, who was only fifteen at the time of leaving, moved with his twelve-year old brother.<sup>111</sup> Henry Safford travelled unaccompanied at 17 years of age: on his shoulders rested the responsibility of emigration, since his father had died and he was the oldest child in the family.<sup>112</sup> Sometimes it was the older daughters who emigrated first, as in the aforementioned cases of Patrick Peak's sister and of John Daly's eldest sister, who was joined by her family as soon as a job was found for the household head.<sup>113</sup>

The wife and young children of an emigrant travelled together when the time came to join the household head overseas, as the examples of Archibald Webster's and Frances Oakley's families mentioned above illustrate. When it was the older siblings who moved first the pattern of emigration was often more gradual: older brothers and sisters were joined by other siblings later on, and eventually by their parents. Gradualness was particularly appropriate when those left behind were numerous. Cyril Cheeseman's father was in his fifties and had to take care of a large family when he considered emigration. As expected, the older children were sent to America first. Then, whenever it was possible, one of them returned home to accompany some of the other siblings across the ocean. Step by step the whole family relocated overseas, the last move being made by the middle-aged parents accompanying the youngest children.<sup>114</sup>

As the foregoing illustrates, the typical mechanism of chain migration in the period under consideration essentially consisted in the successive departure of different

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<sup>108</sup> Jennie Jacobson, EI, 14.

<sup>109</sup> Ann Nelson, EI, 3.

<sup>110</sup> Thomas Muir, FWP, 2.

<sup>111</sup> Henry Cohen, EI, 19.

<sup>112</sup> Henry Safford, FWP, 2.

<sup>113</sup> John Daly, EI, 14.

<sup>114</sup> Cyril Cheeseman, EI, 7.

members of the same family (sometimes all of them), obtained through a rational employment of financial resources and the effective exploitation of personal networks. The following excerpt from Marian Matthews's testimony, which provides a paradigmatic example of chain migration, is worth quoting at length. This passage also shows that the process of chain migration did not exclusively involve blood relations but also in-laws, future in-laws as well as in-laws' relatives:

That goes way back to a cousin of my mother's and she came out as a young girl, married and did rather well and she used to come back and visit. And one year she asked my oldest brother, would he like to come to America and of course he stayed with her. And he jumped, and he came. Then the following – he worked and then the following year he sent for my second oldest brother and [...] the girl that he was to marry, Gwenna, they came out and Gwenna took care of the two men. My brother was married. They got married out here and then she took care of the house. Then the next year they sent for my father, my brother, Cyril and my sister-in-law's brother, Oliver, and they three came out. So she had all of them to take care of. The following year they sent for my mother and Doris and I, and that's how we all got here.<sup>115</sup>

Despite common patterns of relocation being generally adopted, the interviews also reveal that there were a number of possible variations on the theme, connected to the specific circumstances of the emigrants' life.

To begin with, despite the overwhelming evidence of small-group or individually-led emigration, the interviews provide various examples of entire families travelling together overseas. The fact that emigrants could rely on personal networks abroad made the simultaneous relocation of many people a viable, though riskier, move. This strategy of emigration appears to have been adopted more frequently by the FWP informants (many of whom, as we have seen, left in the second half of the nineteenth century) and their families than by the Ellis island interviewees. This may be due to the fact that, at mid-century as well as in the post-Civil War decades, the frontier was significantly expanding in America, which made it comparatively easy to take up farming (a family, rather than individual, enterprise). Indeed, after the end of the conflict large areas were opened to settlement in Kansas, Nebraska, South and North Dakota, the Pacific Northwest and, finally, Oklahoma. By 1890 'three million farms had been added to the million and a half that had existed at mid-century.'<sup>116</sup> Furthermore, the restructuring of

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<sup>115</sup> Marian Matthews, EI, 15.

<sup>116</sup> Taylor, *The Distant Magnet*, 18. Admittedly, between 1900 and 1920 over seven hundred thousand farms were started in the United States, many of them by immigrants (including English and Scots). In fact, '[s]ales of railroad land, state-held land, and former Indian allotments under the 1887 Dawes Severalty Act, together with the distribution of federal lands, disproved conclusively the idea that the frontier ended in 1890 or any year close to it.' Walter Nugent, "Demographic Aspects of European

the work process and the implementation of new efficiency schemes – with the consequent blurring of skill distinctions and the reduction in the number of skilled jobs available<sup>117</sup> – as well as the effects of the Great Migration still lay ahead or were just in their early stages when most of the FWP informants emigrated.<sup>118</sup> This meant that the American job market was not oversupplied with labour and British emigrants did not have to face the competition of large numbers of immigrants, while having more chances of taking advantage of their skills.<sup>119</sup> Consequently, compared to the twentieth century, it was easier and quicker for Britons to find a (possibly good-paying) job, and this made the relocation of entire families a less hazardous move. Joseph Smith, for example, emigrated as a child in 1854 with both of his parents,<sup>120</sup> just as Sidney Domoney and Sam Congram did in 1871 and 1870, at the age of 7 and 14 respectively.<sup>121</sup> The emigrant family might include adult sons and daughters: William Platt, for example, recalls having moved in 1873 with his parents when he was eighteen years old.<sup>122</sup> Examples of entire families moving together, however, are also to be found in the Ellis Island corpus of interviews, as shown by the testimonies of Arthur Dickson, Ken Johnson and Thomas Powell, who at the time of emigration were children travelling with both of their parents.<sup>123</sup>

Though it was usually young people in their prime of life who emigrated, or at least who emigrated *first*, this was not always the case. In fact, Doreen Stenzel's father and grandfather (who was in his fifties) moved together, only to be joined later on by Doreen's mother, grandmother and the informant herself. Three generations were thus involved in the process of relocation.<sup>124</sup> Elsie Hockridge's grandparents on her father's side must have also been in their late forties-early fifties when they emigrated with three

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Migration Worldwide,” in *European Migrants. Global and Local Perspectives*, eds. Dick Hoerder, and Leslie Page Moch, (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1996), 74. It is undeniable, though, that the expansion of the frontier in the first decades of the twentieth century was *comparatively* a far less significant phenomenon than it had been before 1900.

<sup>117</sup> Bodnar, *The Transplanted*, 65.

<sup>118</sup> Between the early 1880s and 1921, when the first restrictionist law was enacted, more than 23 million people emigrated to the United States. In this period, which historians have called the “Great Migration”, the main flow of immigration shifted from northern and western Europe to the southern and eastern European countries such as Italy, Poland and Russia. By the turn of the century the large majority of newcomers in America came from these areas of the Old World., Alan M. Kraut, *The Huddled Masses. The Immigrant in American Society, 1880-1921* (Arlington Heights, IL: Harlan Davidson, 1982), 2.

<sup>119</sup> After about 1890 ‘America’s demand for skilled labour could more and more be met from domestic sources, and for unskilled labour from southern and eastern Europe’. Taylor, *The Distant Magnet*, 44.

<sup>120</sup> Joseph Smith, FWP, 1.

<sup>121</sup> Sidney Domoney, FWP, 1; Sam Congram, FWP, 1.

<sup>122</sup> William Platt, FWP, 1.

<sup>123</sup> Arthur Dickson, EI, 2; Ken Johnson, EI, 1; Thomas Powell, EI, 24.

<sup>124</sup> Doreen Stenzel, EI, 6; 46.

of their adult children. The informant's father came out some time later with Elsie's sister, the plan being that Elsie and her mother would follow them shortly. Sadly, in the meanwhile the informant's mother died and thus Elsie's grandmother had to return to England to pick her up.<sup>125</sup>

It might also happen that a married woman emigrated before her husband. This was the case with Eliza Briggs's stepmother, who moved to the U.S. with her stepdaughter leaving her husband behind. Unfortunately, the testimony does not clarify why the informant's father remained home. We are only told that he joined his wife and daughter almost two years after they had left and that, in England, he was 'the head man over carding machines in a woollen mill' (perhaps the reason why he did not leave sooner was connected to his job?).<sup>126</sup>

Further examples of leavers who did not follow the standard pattern of emigration are offered by the testimony of Arnold Ambler, Thomas Allan, Sidney Pike and William McGuire. Arnold Amber and his wife were a young childless couple who moved together, while Thomas Allan left at a young age with one of his siblings (on the ship, they were looked after by family acquaintances, who functioned as surrogate parents during the trip).<sup>127</sup> Sidney Pike and his brother Arthur were also two young children when they left (Sidney was 11, and his brother must not have been much older), but apparently travelled alone, unsurprisingly putting their personal safety at risk. In fact, as the informant remembers, among other things they 'used to hang over the edge of the ship, very dangerous.'<sup>128</sup> The emigration strategy adopted by William McGuire's parents was also rather unusual (unfortunately, no explanation is offered in the interview as to their behaviour). The male breadwinner moved first, followed after some time by his wife, while the children were left in the care of grandparents. Eventually, the informant's mother returned home to pick up the children and bring them to America.<sup>129</sup>

Finally, it is worth noting that the interval elapsing between the departure of the first member(s) of a family and the eventual reunion with those who had stayed home could vary significantly. As we have seen above, it might take emigrants only a few months to bring the remainder of the family over. Robert Williams's brother was also joined by

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<sup>125</sup> Elsie Hockridge, EI, 4-6.

<sup>126</sup> Eliza Briggs, FWP, 1-2.

<sup>127</sup> Thomas Allan, EI, 7.

<sup>128</sup> Sidney Pike, EI, 10.

<sup>129</sup> William McGuire, EI, 6; 12.

the other members of his family after only six months abroad,<sup>130</sup> and Thomas Sargent's father sent for his family as soon as he got a job (actually, he had made reservations for his wife and children's journey before leaving).<sup>131</sup> However, in some cases emigrants lived apart from their kin for quite a long time. Doreen Stenzel's family, for instance, had to wait two and a half years to be reunited, and many years passed before Donald Roberts's father was able to meet with his family again.<sup>132</sup> Finally, the case of John Flint is worth mentioning, though it was obviously extreme. In fact, Flint reunited with his father after a separation lasting almost nine years, crossing the ocean with his aunt and uncle, since his mother had died just before the trip and was thus never able to join her husband overseas.<sup>133</sup>

#### **IV. Preparing to leave**

There was an emotional as well as a practical side to the process of leaving. Actually, the period preceding the actual departure was accompanied by a variety of feelings, hopes and expectations about the journey and future life in America. Furthermore, emigrants needed to tackle a number of practical and financial problems before embarking.

The emotions aroused by the idea of relocating to America were of a different nature. Though some emigrants looked forward to the move, sadness and anxiety were more common. Worry could also be connected to the idea of the trip itself – particularly to the unpleasantness of the journey on a possibly rough sea and the always present danger of major accidents – or simply arise from a fear of the unknown. For instance, Phyllis Spinney, 15 years old when she sailed from Southampton, recalls that she was scared and did not want to leave her mother.<sup>134</sup> Indeed, severing the ties with the place and the people one loved was a main cause of misery among emigrants. In fact, the sad atmosphere and the tears shed at home or at the ports of departure, which we shall discuss below, reveal the sorrow of emigrants as well as that of the people who were left behind. The feelings often connected to departure are pithily expressed by Ettie Glaser: 'I cried, I stood on the, on the docks and my mother and father were there and I cried. I

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<sup>130</sup> Robert Williams, EI, 26.

<sup>131</sup> Thomas Sargent, EI, 19.

<sup>132</sup> Doreen Stenzel, EI, 21; Donald Roberts, EI, 2.

<sup>133</sup> John Flint, FWP, 1.

<sup>134</sup> Phyllis Spinney, EI, 7.

was excited and I cried because I didn't know where I was going. I knew what I was leaving but I didn't know where I was going.'<sup>135</sup>

Departure could be even more painful for those who had not chosen to go. Elizabeth Nimmo, aged 16 when she came out with her family, recalls her feelings of sadness and resignation at the idea of leaving home. She tried to see the positive side of what, for her, was a highly unsettling situation: 'Well, my mother had made the decision and who was I to question? I mean, we were together, that was the main thing.'<sup>136</sup> However, as revealed later on in the interview, in America she desperately hankered for home: 'I was the most homesick being on earth. If my mother had had the money, someone to send me to, I think she'd put me on the next ship and send me back again. I was ill.'<sup>137</sup>

Often, the emigrants' feelings were conflicting, as the testimony of the anonymous Scotsman quoted at the beginning of this chapter testifies – 'The hardest part after the excitement of packing and planning is over is to face the fact of possible hardship and the breaking of family ties and friendships.' Margaret Whittle also felt predictably sorry for abandoning her parents, but at the same time she was eager to go.<sup>138</sup>

In some cases excitement and expectations prevailed on worry and sadness. George Wray, who was 19 at the time of emigration, affirms that he and his wife were 'young enough to be thrilled by the unknown,'<sup>139</sup> while Vera Tanner recalls that she was excited and did not feel sad at the idea of moving, as she had promised her mother to visit her within two years.<sup>140</sup> Evidently, clinging to the notion of a possible return visit could soften the pain of detachment (the more so, in this case, as the emigrant specified a period of time by which reunion would take place). Indeed, thinking about or promising a future visit might have been a psychological mechanism of self-defence emigrants activated automatically. Moreover, leaving for America did not always mean *separating* from one's family. For those in Britain who had been waiting to join their husbands, fathers or siblings abroad, departure meant *reuniting* with people they loved. This might counterbalance the pain of abandoning one's native land or even make emigrants long for departure. Truly, as Gladys Lambert reveals, her mother 'was dying to come [...] because my father was here.'<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Ettie Glaser, EI, 3.

<sup>136</sup> Elizabeth Nimmo, EI, 6.

<sup>137</sup> Elizabeth Nimmo, EI, 12.

<sup>138</sup> Margaret Whittle, EI, 31.

<sup>139</sup> George Wray, FWP, 2.

<sup>140</sup> Vera Tanner, EI, 23.

<sup>141</sup> Gladys Lambert, EI, 35.

For children, detachment was in general easier than for adults. As the case of Thomas Allan and his brother shows,<sup>142</sup> children could be enthused by the idea of going because of the Wild West image of America they had absorbed from films and the popular press.<sup>143</sup> Furthermore, the fact that, unlike many adults, children did not have to leave their family behind certainly made the idea of moving less unsettling for them. However, unless they were very young, they also had personal ties and bonds of affection in the Old World that they would need to break. Donald Roberts's testimony, for example, reveals that children could have mixed emotions with regard to emigration and, above all, that these might change after the move. In fact, the informant's initial excitement at the thought of leaving is followed, in America, by the sad realization of having left a whole world behind:

Well, the feelings were mixed. Leaving my friends, I was 12 years old at the time, and uh, but coming to a new country, uh, excited us, as kids. Uh, but we had mixed emotions because we were coming to a new country not knowing what was ahead of us but uh I think the excitement over uh overwhelmed the other uh thoughts we might have and uh it wasn't until we were here a while that we realized what a big break we had made and became very homesick.<sup>144</sup>

One of the most important problems emigrants needed to solve before leaving was to find the financial means to pay for the trip and the initial period of adjustment abroad. A variety of strategies were adopted to achieve this objective. Sometimes it was necessary to combine different resources to undertake the move, especially if this involved an entire household.

Personal networks – above all, but not exclusively, family connections – also played a significant role in this phase of the emigration process, just as they did when emigrants reached America. Indeed, personal connections could be instrumental in covering the costs of the ocean journey. As we have seen, the flow of remittances enabled families to make a better living at home and provided extra income that could also be used to move abroad. Overseas networks might sometimes help emigrants to *quickly* find the necessary resources to pay for the trip. Emigrants were often willing to borrow the money that enabled them to come out. An anonymous Englishwoman, for instance, recalls that it was her sister and brother-in-law who paid for her passage, on

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<sup>142</sup> Thomas Allan, EI, 9.

<sup>143</sup> On the construction of the image of America in the century of mass emigration from Europe see the relevant essays in Dick Hoerder and Horst Rössler, *Distant Magnets: Expectations and Realities in the Immigrant Experience, 1840-1930* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1993).

<sup>144</sup> Donald Roberts, EI, 2.

the understanding that she would return the money once in America.<sup>145</sup> According to Archibald Webster, his father borrowed one hundred dollars from a friend, probably the same person who had informed him about job openings in America.<sup>146</sup> And two uncles living in Pennsylvania paid for the tickets of all the members of Joseph Delaney's family. It is quite likely, though the interview does not clarify this point, that Delaney's uncles expected their relatives to return them the money they had advanced.<sup>147</sup>

In some cases connections at the workplace could be decisive. No matter what his motives were – perhaps he had also come from the Old Country, or just cared for his workers – the employer of Jack Carnegie's father 'found out that he was saving up his pay to bring his family over and he gave him the money to bring us.'<sup>148</sup> Miss "Y.", a domestic worker for a wealthy family in Scotland, was also paid the transatlantic passage by her employers (the practice of paying the passage for one's domestics, it must be noted, was probably not uncommon in wealthy households). She was taken to Canada as a cook, but returned home after three months only to emigrate again, this time to the U.S., after a while.<sup>149</sup>

For many, saving represented a way to cover, in part or completely, the travel expenses: this further confirms the planned character of the emigrants' move. According to Robert Williams, his mother collected gold coins until they had enough to leave the country, whereas George Wray saved a small amount of money while working in a grocery store, but he and his wife also had to sell their possessions before the trip.<sup>150</sup> Sometimes it took informants or their relatives a long time to collect the amount of money they needed. Kyffin Williams had been skimping on everything for years before departure: 'I saved in three years time, a hundred dollars, but I would go without underwear, without drawers, just the pants, the shirt, I was afraid to spend the money.'<sup>151</sup>

Finally, a common step taken by emigrant families was to sell their furniture and other possessions, along with their home, if they owned one. This is what Thomas Muir's and Donald Roberts' parents did, for example.<sup>152</sup> The Sargents also sold everything they had to collect money for the journey, except for the informant's

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<sup>145</sup> Anonymous Englishwoman, FWP, 1.

<sup>146</sup> Archibald Webster, EI, 6.

<sup>147</sup> Joseph Delaney, EI, 11.

<sup>148</sup> Jack Carnegie, EI, 5.

<sup>149</sup> Miss "Y.", FWP, 1.

<sup>150</sup> Robert Williams, EI, 28; George Wray, FWP, 2.

<sup>151</sup> Kyffin Williams, EI, 28.

<sup>152</sup> Thomas Muir, FWP, 1; Donald Roberts, EI, 2.



mother's treadle sewing machine, which she probably thought would prove to be useful in the United States.<sup>153</sup>

The exception to the rule with regard to the financing of the transatlantic crossing is represented by emigrants that did not need to skimp, count on remittances, borrow money or sell their belongings to cover the passage costs, as was the case with Mrs "L." and her husband, who could draw on their previous savings to buy the journey tickets.<sup>154</sup>

Once the choice to relocate had been made, emigrants had to select objects and personal belongings to take with them overseas. They did so on the basis of what they thought they would need abroad and what they did not want to leave behind. Emigrants often put their belongings, Maisie Pedersen remembers, in what was called a "steamer trunk".<sup>155</sup> Of course, families brought far heavier luggage to America compared to emigrants who travelled alone. Some people, moreover, did not have much to take with them. The trunk Kyffin Williams carried on board the ship, for instance, just contained his clothes.<sup>156</sup> By contrast, Joseph Delaney's family brought as much as they could to the United States.<sup>157</sup>

Whether they left with their husbands or not, married women were entrusted with the responsibility of packing. In fact, when they were left behind, women had to perform all the tasks connected to the preparation of the journey, including those that men would have carried out or that would have been shared between husband and wife. As Marian Matthews recalls, for instance, 'my mother had to sell the home and do all that.'<sup>158</sup> Women selected the utensils that would help them run their new home abroad, and apparently it was them who chose not to part from some of the house's mementos. It seems clear, then, that the emigrants – women in particular – pragmatically took part of the Old World with them overseas in the form of useful implements. Yet they also attempted to avoid severing the emotional ties with their native home by preserving objects which would remind them of the life they had left behind. Mary Williams's mother, for example, brought to the U.S. pots, pans and dishes, as well as her feather bed, which she evidently considered valuable and comfortable,<sup>159</sup> while Frances

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<sup>153</sup> Thomas Sargent, EI, 15.

<sup>154</sup> Mrs "L." FWP, 2.

<sup>155</sup> Maisie Pedersen, EI, 37.

<sup>156</sup> Kyffin Williams, EI, 32.

<sup>157</sup> Joseph Delaney, EI, 12.

<sup>158</sup> Marian Matthews, EI, 16.

<sup>159</sup> Mary Williams, EI, 5.

Oakley's mother did not part with Alpaca wool blankets and Minton china, which the informant defined as "priceless".<sup>160</sup> Thomas Sargent's mother decided to bring pots and pans to America, and in general 'something to start housekeeping with', but also 'knick-knacks' she was emotionally attached to.<sup>161</sup> Similarly, in a classic 'trunk with a curved top' Thomas Powell's family had stored useful implements, such as kitchenware, as well as keepsakes, which possessed an emotional rather than a practical value.<sup>162</sup> Needless to say, mothers also took to America their children's favourite toys and objects, which would make emigration a less traumatic move for them. Thus, Sheila Koch was allowed to bring along her Teddy bear, while Doreen Stenzel recalls that 'one thing my mother brought was my little cups with cats on it when I was a baby that I drank out of. [...] And I still have two silver egg cups that I used to play with when I was a baby.'<sup>163</sup> The case of Mrs Roberts is also worth mentioning. As she was going to get married in the U.S. (with an Englishman that had left before her), she received many wedding gifts to take across the Atlantic. Thus, she carried three big full trunks on board the *Campania* when she left from Liverpool in 1913. In addition to the wedding gifts, she had blankets and robes to use during the trip as well as her little Singer sewing-machine.<sup>164</sup>

Having packed and made ready to go, the emigrants headed to port. Virtually all of the informants that mention the trip to port in their testimonies say they travelled by train, generally to the nearest place of embarkation. In fact, the railway network made it possible to reach the main British Atlantic ports – from north to south: Glasgow, Liverpool, and Southampton – comparatively easily.<sup>165</sup> Arthur Dickson, for example, took a train from London to Southampton; Kyffin Williams and Robert Reese, both of them Welsh, predictably left from Liverpool, while Jack Carnegie caught a train to Glasgow, where he would embark on the *Carmania*.<sup>166</sup> By contrast, the Dalys left from Liverpool, even though they lived in Glasgow.<sup>167</sup> One of the informants, who left Scotland in 1928, reached port by bus, since his native town was only ten miles away

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<sup>160</sup> Frances Oakley, EI, 8.

<sup>161</sup> Thomas Sargent, EI, 17.

<sup>162</sup> Thomas Powell, EI, 23-24.

<sup>163</sup> Sheila Koch, EI, 11; Doreen Stenzel, EI, 23.

<sup>164</sup> Mrs Roberts, FWP, 4.

<sup>165</sup> Not all emigrants left from the major British ports. In 1911, for example, George Brown embarked at Dover on a Red Star Line vessel, the *Lapland* (George Brown, FWP, 1).

<sup>166</sup> Arthur Dickson, EI, 9; Kyffin Williams, EI, 33; Robert Reese, EI, 27; Jack Carnegie, EI, 8.

<sup>167</sup> John Daly, EI, 15.

from Glasgow.<sup>168</sup> Finally, the case of Cyril Cheeseman's family, who were supposed to leave from Southampton but were forced to go to Liverpool due to the break out of World War I, is worth mentioning.<sup>169</sup>

Emigrants were not often accompanied to port and usually said goodbye to kith and kin at home or at the train station of their hometown. In fact, the trip to port was costly and time-consuming, and evidently not many of the emigrants' relatives thought it worth taking. The farewell ritual involved relatives and, quite often, friends and neighbours as well. For example, Margaret Whittle recalls people visiting and accompanying her to the train station to see her off,<sup>170</sup> while all the neighbours waved Frances Oakley's family goodbye and wished them good luck when they left (cf. the passage quoted at the opening of this chapter). Ann Nelson's family received a memorable farewell when they left Bathgate in 1923. In fact, early in the morning neighbours walked them to the train station to the sound of Scottish traditional music: 'it was – wasn't even dawn I think when we left our house with nearly every neighbor trailing behind us down to the train station. [...] And that I remember and – and there was a piper playing as we walked. It was a grand send off, you know.'<sup>171</sup>

Irrespective of where they took place, the farewells are often remembered as heart-rending events. In the case of Henry Cohen reliving the moment of departure had the power to move the speaker even at the time of interview, as shown by the passage quoted at the beginning of the chapter. And again: Thomas Sargent's family had 'a tearful goodbye' at home, while Robert Reese's sad farewell to his mother at the port of embarkation port remained etched in his memory.<sup>172</sup> In the case of little children, of course, the goodbyes did not have the same emotional impact as they had on adults, as children did not often realize the full consequences of leaving. Kathleen Harlow was only four when she left England:

I remember people saying goodbye to us. I wasn't sure what was happening. You know, going to America could have been going down the street. It didn't mean anything to me. And everybody waving, and my aunt crying. And it was quite a turmoil and they were waving flags and all sorts of carrying on.<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> William McGuire, EI, 14.

<sup>169</sup> Cyril Cheeseman, EI, 2.

<sup>170</sup> Margaret Whittle, EI, 28-29.

<sup>171</sup> Ann Nelson, EI, 14.

<sup>172</sup> Thomas Sargent, EI, 21; Robert Reese, EI, 29.

<sup>173</sup> Kathleen Harlow, EI, 16-17.

Emigrants often received gifts and mementos from relatives and friends which were meant to remind them of life and people in the Old Country. Gladys Lambert, for example, was given a nightdress case by the lady next door, while Kathleen Harlow's father was presented with a "patriotic" gift on departure, a cigarette silver case with a British flag folded up in it, so that he would not forget where he came from.<sup>174</sup> Finally, Robert Reese recalls that his quarry workmates made a pie for him and gave him a Bible to bring to the United States.<sup>175</sup> Maisie Pedersen also received various presents during a goodbye dinner that her family organized and that her friends attended.<sup>176</sup> This was the exception rather than the rule. In fact, the evidence provided by the sources shows that, normally, no special event such as a "wake" – as was common in the case of Irish emigrants in the nineteenth century – or a lavish farewell dinner was held at home or at the workplace on the occasion of someone's departure.

The Ellis Island testimonies also provide a glimpse of the medical examination and procedures some emigrants went through *before* leaving. This was already common prior to the passing of restrictionist immigration laws in the U.S. in 1921 and 1924. Sidney Pike, who was supposed to embark on the *Teutonic* in 1910, remembers that 'doctors of the White Star Line were charged by their own company for examination of steerage passengers that if we landed here and were rejected, White Star had to send them back, and not necessarily steerage department.'<sup>177</sup> Gladys Lambert was vaccinated before departure, in 1913. Similarly, Myrtle Berlinghoff, who left England in 1920, remembers she was given four vaccinations.<sup>178</sup> Arnold Ambler, who also left England in 1920, recalls that American doctors were involved in the physical examinations, because the United States government wanted 'to know what kind of people they were getting.'<sup>179</sup> This is confirmed by Kate Barham, who worked from 1924 to 1929 as a housemaid for an American doctor who examined would-be emigrants leaving from Southampton:

He was an American doctor that was sent by the American government by the United States Public Health Service. And he was stationed at the Consulate Office in Southampton. [...] He was a doctor that examined people that came there for their visas and their papers to come to the United States.<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> Gladys Lambert, EI, 32; Kathleen Harlow, EI, 17.

<sup>175</sup> Robert Reese, EI, 30.

<sup>176</sup> Maisie Pedersen, EI, 38.

<sup>177</sup> Sidney Pike, EI, 5-6.

<sup>178</sup> Gladys Lambert, EI, 33; Myrtle Berlinghoff, EI, 14.

<sup>179</sup> Arnold Ambler, EI, 13.

<sup>180</sup> Kate Barham, EI, 1.

Angela McCarthy points out that the inspection of the emigrants leaving for America ‘was conducted at the port of departure by consular staff of the United States government [and that this] procedure was in the interests of shipping companies as they were not only fined for transporting inadmissible migrants, but were also liable for the expenditure of taking migrants home if denied entry to the United States on medical grounds.’<sup>181</sup> However, not everybody was subjected to an examination at port. It seems that some of the emigrants could prove they enjoyed good health otherwise. This is the case of Robert Reese, for example, who had his state of full health certified by his own doctor.<sup>182</sup>

Actually, some of the emigrants were rejected on medical grounds and had to postpone their departure. Sidney Pike and his brothers, for instance, were judged to be too “puny”. They were left in the care of grandparents, who ‘fattened them up’ so that, three months later, they were able to embark for America.<sup>183</sup> Similarly, Harry Sonnes’ father was not allowed to leave due to an eye infection, and thus the whole family had to delay their trip.<sup>184</sup>

As we have seen above, a few of the interviewees had first chosen Canada as their destination. Others also headed for British America, but they only did so as the best strategy to assure themselves entry into the United States. This is the case with a few informants who left Great Britain in the 1920s. They embarked on vessels bound for Canada in order to avoid possible problems connected to the passing of the immigration quota bills by the American legislature in 1921 and 1924.<sup>185</sup> Thomas Sargent, for

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<sup>181</sup> McCarthy, *Personal Narratives*, 79.

<sup>182</sup> Robert Reese, EI, 28.

<sup>183</sup> Sidney Pike, 1-2.

<sup>184</sup> Harry Sonnes, EI, 7.

<sup>185</sup> In 1921 the American Congress passed a bill limiting the annual immigration from each European country to 3% of its nationals as counted in the 1910 American census and to a maximum of 357,000 people. According to those who favoured further restrictions this allowed too large a number of entries from southern and eastern Europe. They asked Congress to fix a 2% quota to the number of foreign born and to use the 1890 census as point of reference, since in 1890 far fewer southern and eastern European immigrants had entered the United States. This proposal was criticized by some Congressmen on the grounds of blatant ethnic discrimination. A mediation, slanted towards the position expressed by the restrictionists, was found between the different positions: ‘the Johnson-Reed Immigration Act of 1924 provided that the 2 per cent plan based on the 1890 census would go into effect until 1927. Thereafter the maximum allowed immigration to the United States would be approximately 150,000, to be allocated in proportion to the representation of the various nationalities in the whole white population counted in the 1920 census’. Thomas Archdeacon, *Becoming American. An Ethnic History* (New York: The Free Press, 1983), 171-72. A clear and detailed description of the immigration restriction acts passed in the U.S. in the 1920s as well as of the American Congress and Senate debates about this subject is to be found in

example, left for Canada in 1923 since he had been born there and no official regulation limited the flow of Canadian people south of the border. Indeed, in this period uncertainties and delays prompted many emigrants to depart for Canada and then continue by rail to the United States.<sup>186</sup>

The new system notoriously favoured the “old stock” emigrant groups. This is one of the reasons why the generous quota allocated to people from Great Britain was never filled during the decade. However, the introduction of the Johnson-Reed Act in 1924 created apprehensions in the potential emigrants, especially in Scotland, where the outflow of people to overseas destinations was very intense in the 1920s. Actually, it ‘may have been the key factor in precipitating the decision to emigrate among the skilled tradesmen and industrial workers who constituted much of the exodus, and who preferred the more developed economy of the United States to that of Canada.’<sup>187</sup> It is understandable, therefore, that in 1923 Thomas Sargent’s father made his family board an American vessel because, in his opinion, this would give them a better chance to enter the United States:

Dad had made arrangements to ship us out on a U.S. Line ship because at that time, at the end of the year, there was a possibility that we wouldn’t get in the quota, and that we would be sent back. But the greater possibility to get in was by coming on a U.S. ship, because that would cost United States money to get us back.<sup>188</sup>

Thomas Sargent’s father plan, however, backfired. In fact, the informant recalls ships “racing” through the Atlantic to make sure the emigrants they carried would fall within the allowed quotas. Apparently, the British Cunard Line ship *Mauritania* beat the American *Leviathan* to the New York harbour, and thus ‘she was within the quota for immigrants to the United States, and we weren’t.’<sup>189</sup> The Sargents were then transferred to another ship and had to wait a whole week before being permitted to land. Such a delay had a strong emotional impact on the informant’s mother, who was ‘just frantic’

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Roger Daniels, *Guarding the Golden Door. American Immigration Policy and Immigrants since 1882* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2004), 46-58.

<sup>186</sup> Harper, *Emigration from Scotland between the Wars*, 31. Predictably, in 1923 border controls between Canada and the U.S. were tightened. Nicholas J. Evans, “The Emigration of Skilled Male Workers from Clydeside during the Interwar Period”. *International Journal of Maritime History* 18, 1 (June 2006), 268.

<sup>187</sup> Harper and Evans, “Socio-economic Dislocation and Inter-war Emigration,” 547.

<sup>188</sup> Thomas Sargent, EI, 19.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

and filled with apprehension at the thought of not being admitted and of not reuniting with her husband.<sup>190</sup>

The restrictive legislation also posed new obstacles and affected negatively some steps of the emigration process. Truly, after the passing of the quota laws red tape could prove a veritable stumbling block for potential emigrants, so much so that it greatly delayed the departure of some of them. It was not uncommon for emigrants to wait for a rather long time before being allowed to leave. In fact, they had to join a list which established the order of departure based on the allowed number of entrances. As Mary Williams recalls, ‘my father had been trying for two years to get on the quota. Because in those days they had a quota, and you had to sign up if you wanted to come to the United States.’<sup>191</sup> Indeed, after a few years in America Donald Roberts decided to return home, since he could not be reunited with his relatives, and only later did the whole family together leave Britain again.<sup>192</sup>

## **V. Parting from Britain**

The FWP and Ellis Island testimonies illuminate a wide variety of aspects of British emigrants’ experience in the phase preceding the transatlantic journey. First of all, they prove that no single explanation can be given for such a complex phenomenon as emigration, and that the reasons emigrants had for moving were many and included structural as well as personal factors. At the same time, the interviews reveal that the difficult economic conditions and bleak prospects of emigrants at home were the prime motive in prompting departure; in short, they usually provided the necessary, though not sufficient, grounds for leaving.

The testimonies also clarify that the pull of America played a crucial role in the emigrants’ process of decision making, and that this pull was based on a core image of the United States as the land of opportunities. Though some emigrants held distorted expectations about life in the New World – typically predicated on the streets-paved-with-gold myth – many cultivated a more restrained dream based on the conviction that America was a better place to live and raise children than Great Britain. Social and

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<sup>190</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>191</sup> Mary Williams, EI, 5.

<sup>192</sup> Donald Roberts, EI, 2.

political equality, in particular the perceived absence of status hierarchies, were also elements emigrants considered, though their significance should not be overstated.

Furthermore, the FWP and Ellis Island interviews reveal the variety of functions played by personal networks in helping potential emigrants to make a final decision about departure and actuate their move; the flow of letters and remitted money from the other side of the Atlantic was the most visible sign of a transnational connection that was crucial in providing both vital information (especially about the availability of work) and essential financial aid to those who were considering emigration or had been left behind.

The testimonies show the emigrants to have been active and rational beings carefully weighing both the advantages and disadvantages of emigration and planning every single step of their move, once the decision to go had been made, in order to minimize risks and maximize benefits for their family. Indeed, despite the transatlantic move having become much more of an individual venture compared with the past (though emigrants often travelled with relatives or friends), the emotional and economic world within which emigrants lived was that of the family.

The main pattern of emigration – young married men or older siblings (often, but not always, male) leaving first, joined later by the other members of the family – emerges clearly from the accounts, along with several possible variations.

The FWP and Ellis Island oral histories make it also possible to identify similarities as well as differences in the role men and women played during the period preceding migration. In particular, as we have seen, women played an important part in the decision-making process and the tackling of a variety of practical issues before departure. Moreover, they were entrusted with the task of moving overseas both useful implements and family mementos that would help recreate a sense of the old home in the new country.

In addition, the sources shed light on the peculiar experience of emigrant children at this stage of the emigration process. Children were not charged with the responsibility of making decisions and organizing the move, and the goodbyes and separation from their native country were usually a less emotionally trying experience for them. Indeed, they normally travelled with one or both of their parents and their siblings, and had fewer and often weaker personal ties to sever. For some of them, though, leaving their country could also be an upsetting experience. Finally, in this connection it is worth emphasizing that, together with the problems they needed to solve and the decisions



they had to make before departure, the interviews highlight the feelings accompanying emigrants in various moments of this complex phase of their life – from the excitement and worry at the decision to go to the heart-renting separation from relatives and friends.

A long and often unpleasant trip across the ocean, followed by the feared passage through America's Golden Door, awaited the emigrants before they could finally reach the Land of Plenty. On getting aboard the steamers that would take them overseas they entered a transitional stage between the Old World and the New. They set out on a physical as well as an emotional journey leading them to a new life which was full of promises and uncertainties. It is to this veritable rite of passage that the next chapter will turn attention.

## CHAPTER 4

### *Britons across the sea*

But I remember we came steerage and we were down underneath. I remember it was kind of rough.<sup>1</sup>

Well, of course, being an immigrant, I went third class, which to me was very nice. We had good meals, too. We got seasick. That wasn't so good.<sup>2</sup>

When I first came out the board was terrible. Se came out in third class. The last time we came across it was much nicer. The dining room was so large you couldn't see the end of it.<sup>3</sup>

The boat on which we came over was loaded with pig iron and as the boat rolled, the iron shifted from side to side, sometimes we were up and again we were 'doon'. One night I remember was particularly rough. Some of the boys were in the beds, others were playing cards, when an extra hard lurch sent the ones in bed out on the floor, the ones on one side across to the other. There was pandemonium.<sup>4</sup>

All – all I can tell you is my mother was a very poor sailor. And the minute she put her foot on a ship, even before it moved, she was sick. And she was sick for the whole time she was – we were traveling.<sup>5</sup>

Sargent: Mother brought us up on deck and she said, 'Look, there's the Statue of Liberty, and this is New York.' And all the skyscrapers, and things like that.

Moore: And what was like that?

Sargent: I was, I was awed. You know, you, at that age you just look it over now and say, 'wow, this is a new country.' You know, it's completely new. You never knew what to expect. But everything was awe-inspiring.<sup>6</sup>

We all went up on, out on deck to see the Statue of Liberty. We didn't quite understand what it was all about, but everybody was so trilled about it, so.<sup>7</sup>

A ferry, like a ferry, yes. And everybody was standing up. And they took us to this God forsaken place. Oh my God, when we saw that, we thought we were going to jail. Because it was all fenced and everything. Really, really, you would think they would harbor criminals there instead of just immigrants. Because I don't think it was, should I say this?<sup>8</sup>

I said oh, boy, I was scared out of my wits that I wouldn't get through. [...] But, uh ... and as I was saying it's so confusing, you're anxious to get through, you don't bother about the next person.<sup>9</sup>

In fact, before I got off Ellis Island I was wishing I was on the ship going back to Scotland because they asked you so many questions.<sup>10</sup>

Gumb: What was the examination like. What were they?

Delaney: Physical. Everything. Oh. Your heart, your head, your feet, your ... under your belly. Oh yes. And other parts. The private parts of your body were all examined, see if you had any diseases. Oh yes.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Agnes Fairchild, EI, 22.

<sup>2</sup> Vera Tanner, EI, 28.

<sup>3</sup> Rachel Williams, FWP, 1.

<sup>4</sup> William Whytock, FWP, 2.

<sup>5</sup> Henrietta Lindsay, EI, 10.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Sargent, EI, 23.

<sup>7</sup> Myrtle Berlinghoff, EI, 17.

<sup>8</sup> Ettie Glaser, EI, 10.

<sup>9</sup> Arnold Ambler, EI, 18.

<sup>10</sup> Mary Dunn, EI, 14.

<sup>11</sup> Joseph Delaney, EI, 20.

I remember a cubicle and there was a doctor and he wore white – long coat. We had to take all our clothes off. We had to strip. And I can't remember what he did. I'm sure he looked in our throats and ears and whatever and our scalp and skin and everything. You couldn't have any kind of – anything wrong with you. They – they were very, very strict in those days. And then from there we went over to the train station. And we went to Cleveland where my aunt and uncle was waiting for my mother, sister and I.<sup>12</sup>

Sigrist: Can you tell me how your parents greeted each other?

Stenzel: Oh, my goodness. I guess that was something, after three years, my mother and my father together again. A lot of crying, a lot of tears. Uh, and my grandmother, too. It was a very emotional meeting, I know that. But a happy, happy kind of, very, very happy.<sup>13</sup>

[...] the neighborhood that we came to was in the heart of Germantown, Philadelphia. So, to me it wasn't near as nice a neighborhood as what we moved from, you see.<sup>14</sup>

The voyage across the Atlantic represented a transitional stage of the emigrants' life, a liminal experience in a world apart, the ship, which somehow prepared them for what would follow after landing. Aboard transatlantic steamers men and women found themselves in unfamiliar surroundings, away from their old home but not yet settled in their new one.

The two main stages into which the transitional phase can be divided – the crossing and the passage through Ellis Island – could prove quite worrying for emigrants, though they were often sustained by relatives or friends travelling with them. Indeed, the emigration proper was the second challenge they had to face, after the decision to leave and preparation for the trip and before the start of a new life in a foreign land.

Much of the account concerning the Atlantic journey offered in the following pages, and all of the evidence regarding the processing phase at New York's immigrant depot derives from the Ellis Island oral histories. In fact, the move overseas and the passage through the Golden Door are central to the interviews produced by the staff of the Ellis Island Oral History Office. By contrast, the list of topics suggested by the Federal Writers Project *Manual for Folklore Studies* to collect the informants' life history does not include the ocean crossing, or any other theme specifically connected to migration. The *Manual for Social-Ethnic Studies* does invite fieldworkers to investigate all phases of emigration, including 'the conditions of the sea voyage and landing.'<sup>15</sup> However, as already pointed out several times, the majority of the FWP interviews tapped in this

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<sup>12</sup> Sheila Koch, EI, 10.

<sup>13</sup> Doreen Stenzel, EI, 30.

<sup>14</sup> Mary Williams, EI, 32.

<sup>15</sup> *Manual for Social-Ethnic Studies*, Federal Writers' Project, [n.p.], 1938. Library of Congress, Washington D.C. Manuscript Division, US WPA Records, Container A8, 8.

work were gathered within the Folklore Studies Unit and the manuals' directions were frequently overlooked. Actually, in the FWP life histories the pre-emigration phase and, even more so, the emigration stage of the migratory experience are investigated in far less depth than life in America. It is not by chance that the anthologies of FWP interviews published so far do not normally feature significant thematic sections about life in the homeland and the ocean journey, despite the selected passages having been culled from a wide corpus of testimonies of immigrants of various nationalities.<sup>16</sup> Notwithstanding this limitation, the FWP interviews with British immigrants provide some valuable information on the transitional phase of the migratory experience, also covering different ground from the Ellis Island oral histories.

## I. Braving the waves

Sailing ship trips are mentioned a few times in the FWP interview corpus. In fact, as already pointed out, the testimonies of some of the FWP informants go back to events that occurred at mid-nineteenth century. Needless to say, crossing the Atlantic on a sailing ship was a protracted venture that wore emigrants out.<sup>17</sup> For example, Alex Russell and his family, who left Britain in 1856, reached America's shores after a journey lasting two months.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, in 1853 Mrs Susan Beach crossed the ocean on the *Sir Robert Peel*, a wooden sailing vessel which landed in New York after seven weeks at sea.<sup>19</sup> In the 1860s the era of the sailing vessel was not over yet, though it was fast approaching its end. Actually, in 1866 Mrs Isabelle Allred and her parents left from Liverpool on a sailing ship, which took them to America in about six weeks.<sup>20</sup>

The testimonies also offer a glimpse of the dreadful conditions of steerage travel in the 1850s. Indeed, not only did those who travelled on a sailing ship face a long and perilous voyage, they also had to cope with lack of facilities and inadequate

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<sup>16</sup> The exception to the rule is Bruce M. Stave and John F. Sutherland's *From the Old Country. An Oral History of European Migration to America* (Hanover, NH, and London: University Press of New England, 1994). In particular, the first two chapters of this volume present excerpts illuminating the emigrants' life in their native land and the journey experience (1-50).

<sup>17</sup> For a classic discussion of the vessels plying the Atlantic route at mid-nineteenth century and British emigrants' journey during the sailing ship age cf. Coleman, *Passage to America*, 101-145.

<sup>18</sup> Alex Russell, FWP, 1.

<sup>19</sup> Susan Beach, FWP, 1.

<sup>20</sup> Isabelle Allred, FWP, 1.

accommodation.<sup>21</sup> Susan Beach, who left England in 1853, recalls that the passengers' luggage was piled up all around them on deck, and that emigrants had only one stove on which to cook their meals, with the obvious result that the smell of food constantly hanged below deck.<sup>22</sup> At the time, in fact, emigrants only received insufficient and sometimes inedible food rations on board, which made it necessary for them to rely on their own provisions.<sup>23</sup>

Mrs Glasson's husband also emigrated to the USA at mid-nineteenth century. The informant perhaps exaggerates her husband's troubles and she seems to rely on a stereotypical account of the ocean crossing in the pre-steamship era, which emphasizes the dangers and miseries of the journey. Yet Mr Glasson's trip was no doubt very long, and it must also have been quite unpleasant:

My husband said the sail vessel he came to America on was tossed about on the Atlantic for eight weeks. When they were half-way across, the winds swept the ship back in sight of the English mainland! Many were the times they thought they were lost and would never see land again. The crew often had to bail water from the hull to keep the vessel from sinking. They were miserably cold, hungry, and often wet. They had to stand hardships of all kinds.<sup>24</sup>

From the 1860s onwards emigrants usually boarded steamers, which made the trip much shorter and far more comfortable compared to the previous period.<sup>25</sup> Most of the emigrants interviewed by the FWP fieldworkers boarded older-generation steamers: Thomas Muir, for example, embarked on the *Majestic* in 1875, while Sidney Domoney, in 1871, boarded the *City of London*.<sup>26</sup> Some of these were state-of-the-art vessels at the

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<sup>21</sup> In the age of sailing ships, William Van Vugt observes, 'the transatlantic voyage was often so long and horrible that it is impossible to comprehend fully today. The average sailing from Liverpool to New York took a month or more, but bad weather or bad ships doubled or even tripled the ordeal. [...] Today it is scarcely possible to imagine what it was like to endure weeks, even months, on a poorly ventilated, foul-smelling, and dangerously ill-equipped sailing ship, and being sick for much of the time.' William E. Van Vugt, *British Buckeyes. The English, Scots, and Welsh in Ohio, 1700-1900* (Kent, OH: The Kent State University Press, 2006), 41-42.

<sup>22</sup> Susan Beach, FWP, 1.

<sup>23</sup> On the distribution of food and water provisions in mid-nineteenth century sailing ships cf. Terry Coleman, *Passage to America. A History of Emigrants from Great Britain and Ireland to America in the mid-nineteenth century* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972), 121-25, 138-40.

<sup>24</sup> Mrs Glasson, FWP, 6.

<sup>25</sup> Steamship travel was about a third more expensive than crossing the ocean by sailing ships. Yet 'the new vessels radically increased speed, comfort and safety. In the 1850s it took six weeks to cross the Atlantic. By 1914 the average voyage time had fallen to around a week'. Indeed, 'in the early 1860s, 45 per cent of transatlantic emigrants left in sailing ships, but the number fell rapidly in the next few years so that, by 1870, all but a tiny minority travelled in steamships. By drastically cutting voyage times the steamship also removed one of the major costs of emigration: the time between embarkation and settlement during which there was no possibility of earning.' Thomas M. Devine, *The Scottish Nation. A History 1700-2000* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1999), 475.

<sup>26</sup> Thomas Muir, FWP, 2; Sidney Domoney, FWP, 1.

time of the interviewees' emigration, and looked modern and very well equipped to them. In 1875, for example, Robert Smalley left on one of the new steamers that started plying the Atlantic after the American Civil War. He recalls that everything was up to date on the ship, which even featured a drug shop and a chapel, and all kinds of amusements were provided on board, with dancing going on every night.<sup>27</sup>

By contrast, the Ellis Island interviewees often embarked on faster and better equipped vessels built in the twentieth century, usually of the Cunard, Anchor or White Star lines,<sup>28</sup> featuring "third-class" rather than steerage accommodation.<sup>29</sup> The informants generally remember the name of the ship that took them overseas, and thus we are told that they reached America on the *Carmania*, the *Caronia*, the *Columbia*, the *Cameronia*, the *Berengaria*, the *Leviathan*, the *Dominion*, the *Adriatic*, the *Etruria* and many other recently or fairly-recently launched vessels.<sup>30</sup>

Some of the Ellis Island interviewees, Jack Carnegie for example, briefly describe their sleeping quarters, which were normally bunk beds in small compartments.<sup>31</sup> As we have seen in the previous chapter, travellers often used trunks, as well as suitcases, to carry their belongings overseas.<sup>32</sup> In their cabins, though, emigrants only brought what was useful and convenient to have within reach during the voyage. Margaret Kirk explains what must have been the usual "luggage arrangements" on board: the emigrants' trunks, she says, were put in the ship's hold, while 'you had a little suitcase that you took to your cabin, just to dress everyday, and night clothes and stuff.'<sup>33</sup> Apparently, most emigrants did not find accommodation objectionable. Donald Roberts clarifies why: the members of his family, he says, were not used to luxuries and the

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<sup>27</sup> Robert Smalley, FWP, 1.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Angela McCarthy, "Migrant Voyages to New Worlds in the Twentieth Century", *International Journal of Maritime History* 18, 1 (June 2006), 82.

<sup>29</sup> As Bruce M. Stave and John F. Sutherland note, '[b]y the twentieth century many shipping companies had added a third class, which usually accommodated six to a cabin and provided galleys, dining rooms, smoking rooms, bars, more plentiful toilets, and showers. Yet [...] older and smaller lines were still transporting thousands of passengers in disagreeable steerage conditions.' Stave and Sutherland, *From the Old Country*, 26. Most of the Ellis Island informants, it seems, travelled third class, not steerage. In fact, as Philip Taylor pointed out, '[o]nly British vessels, setting out from British ports, seem to have gone over completely to the Third class, though many foreign ships housed some emigrants that way. It seems reasonable to guess, therefore, that the old steerage accommodated a substantial majority.' Taylor, *The Distant Magnet*, 164.

<sup>30</sup> For a brief history of the Cunard and White Star lines, as well as a complete list of the Cunard ships from 1840 to 1954 specifying their main technical details and dates of service see Frank E. Dodman, *Ships of the Cunard Line* (London: Adlard Coles, 1955).

<sup>31</sup> Jack Carnegie, EI, 9.

<sup>32</sup> Vera Tanner's luggage, for instance, was made up of a little trunk and a suitcase (Vera Tanner, EI, 30).

<sup>33</sup> Margarte Kirk, EI, 44-45.

small cabin they shared was indeed good enough for them.<sup>34</sup> In fact, the conditions of the houses emigrants had left were often far from satisfactory and, as already noted, in the first decades of the twentieth century many travelled in new third-class compartments, which represented a significant improvement from the previous steerage accommodation. Not all emigrants shared the same opinion, though, due to different standards of comparison and different conditions on board. According to Elizabeth Nimmo, the ship was crowded and the accommodation (the small bunk beds in particular) ‘very rough’ compared to what she was used to at home. Moreover, her mother apparently spotted rats below deck.<sup>35</sup>

When all or many members of the same family travelled together they often could have a cabin just for themselves, as the above-mentioned testimony of Donald Roberts shows. Yet, when this was not the case, accommodation had to be divided among fellow travellers. Frances Oakley and her brother, for instance, shared their cabin with a lady and her son.<sup>36</sup> In some ships men’s and women’s sleeping quarters were kept separate. Actually, Eleanor Lenhart’s family had to split on board, since on the *Berengaria* men were not allowed to occupy the same section of the third class as women and children.<sup>37</sup>

The food served on board does not seem to have given the emigrants particular cause for complaint, either, except in a few cases. Even if it was not very good, nobody went hungry, and the ship’s fare was quite different from what was handed out in steerage (to complement the emigrants’ own supplies) in the first half of the nineteenth century vessels.<sup>38</sup> Opinions might vary also on the basis of the kind of food emigrants were served on different ships and, possibly, on what they used to eat at home. Mary Dunn, for instance, saw corn on the cob for the first time on board but refused to touch it since, she remarked, ‘we feed that to the cows at home’. By contrast, Margaret Whittle judged the food served on the ship to be ‘wonderful.’<sup>39</sup>

Though accommodation and fare were often considered good enough by the emigrants, travelling third-class could be unpleasant, and the contrast with the other sections of the ship was evident. Donald Roberts, for example, recalls going out on deck for fresh air, since the sleeping quarters were cramped and the conditions inside the ship

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<sup>34</sup> Donald Roberts, EI, 3-4.

<sup>35</sup> Elizabeth Nimmo, EI, 5.

<sup>36</sup> Frances Oakley, EI, 4.

<sup>37</sup> Eleanor Lenhart, EI, 5.

<sup>38</sup> On the reaction of immigrants to the food they were served on board cf. Angela McCarthy, *Personal Narratives of Irish and Scottish Migration, 1921-65. ‘For Spirit and Adventure’* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2007), 95-96.

<sup>39</sup> Mary Dunn, EI, 9; Margaret Whittle, EI, 35.

were often stifling.<sup>40</sup> Likewise, Margaret Whittle went often upstairs since all the people in her cabin were sick.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, for travellers in good health the state of affairs below deck could be quite disagreeable. Little wonder that Patrick Peak's cousins, who had been back to Scotland on a visit, had booked tickets on the same ship as the family's informant, but in tourist class. This was considerably more comfortable than the emigrants' section, as the informant noticed when he saw it:

And I remember them coming and taking us through their quarters up, up where the tourists were. At that time, it seemed so different from where we were down below in the hold someplace, you know. They were up in the regular Captain's ballroom and all that stuff, dining room, where we were just seated at a regular wooden plank table, you know, where all the immigrants were brought over.<sup>42</sup>

Almost all of the working-class emigrants travelled steerage or third class, as they could not afford better accommodation. A few exceptions to the rule can be found, though. Second-class passengers, of course, had a rather different journey experience from the other emigrants, not least because, when they reached America, they did not have to go through the examination and questioning at Ellis Island. Thomas Powell, for example, recalls that he and his family slept in a second-class cabin.<sup>43</sup> Margaret Kirk, a 22 years old young woman leaving Scotland in 1923, also bought a second-class ticket, which apparently was worth the money. In fact, she slept in a 'lovely cabin' reserved for only two people, was satisfied with the food and really enjoyed herself on board because there was dancing every night on the *Transylvania*.<sup>44</sup> Interestingly, Kyffin William explains why he decided to travel second class. He did so on the advice of his fellow traveller, a returned emigrant leaving again for the United States, who told him to purchase a second-class ticket so that they would be examined on board and thus would avoid going through the Ellis Island admission procedures.<sup>45</sup> In this case, therefore, friendship networks (along with the fact that the informant could evidently afford travelling second-class) spared one of the newcomers the trials of the immigration depot.

The length of the voyage varied depending on the season, the weather conditions and the kind of vessel the emigrants boarded, the post-1900 ocean crossing being normally

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<sup>40</sup> Donald Roberts, EI, 3.

<sup>41</sup> Margaret Whittle, EI, 33.

<sup>42</sup> Patrick Peak, EI, 6.

<sup>43</sup> Thomas Powell, EI, 25.

<sup>44</sup> Margaret Kirk, EI, 39, 49-50.

<sup>45</sup> Kyffin Williams, EI, 34.



significantly quicker than in the previous decades. Actually, in the second half of the nineteenth century the transatlantic trip was usually still quite long (two weeks or more). In some cases, though, if a happy combination of factors occurred, the journey could be comparatively short in this period as well. As we have seen above, for example, both Robert Smalley and Sidney Domoney embarked on steamers, the former in 1875 and the latter in 1871. Yet Smalley spent as many as twenty-two days at sea, while “only” ten days were necessary to the *City of London*, on which Domoney was travelling, to reach New York.<sup>46</sup>

A week at sea, even less, was enough for the twentieth century steamers in favourable weather conditions. In 1925, travelling in good weather, it took the Roberts seven days to cross the ocean on the *Acquitania*, while in 1923 Thomas Sargent spent just 5 days on the *Leviathan*.<sup>47</sup> By contrast, Kyffin Williams’s journey on the *Baltic* lasted eleven days, due to the roughness of the sea.<sup>48</sup> In fact, some of the emigrants who travelled after 1900 boarded older vessels, and therefore their journey lasted comparatively longer: Sidney Pike, for instance, left in 1910 on a ship built in 1889, the *Teutonic*, which arrived at New York two weeks after departure.<sup>49</sup>

The length of the trip was also affected by the stopovers some ships made at other ports to collect more emigrants. For example, most of the passengers on the vessel on which Arnold Ambler embarked were Irish who had been picked up at Queenstown.<sup>50</sup> Jack Carnegie also recalls that the *Columbia*, after raising anchor at Glasgow, called at Belfast harbour to take passengers on board.<sup>51</sup> The steamers leaving from the south of Britain might stop at French ports. The Cunard Line vessel leaving from Southampton on which Donald Roberts was travelling, for example, called at Cherbourg to collect central and southern European emigrants destined for the United States.<sup>52</sup> Similarly, the ship Doreen Stenzel boarded in Southampton, the *Berengaria*, called at the nearby port of Le Havre to pick up more passengers.<sup>53</sup>

In this connection it is worth noting that, sometimes, all or most of the passengers who embarked on an transatlantic vessel were of the same nationality, or even came from the same geographical area. The emigrants Joseph Delaney travelled with, for

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<sup>46</sup> Robert Smalley, FWP, 1; Sidney Domoney, FWP, 1.

<sup>47</sup> Thomas Sargent, EI, 23.

<sup>48</sup> Donald Roberts, EI, 4; Kyffin Williams, EI, 35.

<sup>49</sup> Sidney Pike, EI, 10.

<sup>50</sup> Arnold Ambler, FWP, 10.

<sup>51</sup> Jack Carnegie, EI, 7.

<sup>52</sup> Donald Roberts, EI, 3.

<sup>53</sup> Doreen Stenzel, EI, 23.

instance, were mainly from Glasgow.<sup>54</sup> Yet, aboard the ship taking them overseas, emigrants often came into contact with people of other nationalities for the first time. This foreshadowed what they would experience on arrival, at Ellis Island, and later on in American society at large. Kyffin Williams, for instance, was surprised at seeing so many people of different nationalities leaving from Liverpool.<sup>55</sup> Incomprehensible languages and unfamiliar appearance could unsettle some of the emigrants and make their prejudices emerge. They found differences puzzling, to say the least, and chose to keep away from “alien” beings:

Applebome: And what was your impression of seeing people from other countries?

Roberts: Well, I was bewildered and uh, I um I was afraid of them and I tried to stay away from them as much as I could because they were entirely different type of people. Of course they, uh some of them were dressed very shabbily and uh spoke languages that didn't mean anything to us, and uh, they were different breed of people you might say. So we didn't associate with them. We just had any contacts with English speaking people.<sup>56</sup>

The conditions of sky and sea affected the experience of passengers during the crossing. Some of the emigrants enjoyed nice weather and fairly calm sea, while others were not so lucky. George Wray, as we have seen above, did not dislike the trip, probably also because of the mild weather his ship encountered. Edward Brown had a wonderful time on board, since no storms broke during the voyage and he was not seasick.<sup>57</sup> By contrast, William Whytock recalls that the passage was rather rough and the boat pitched heavily.<sup>58</sup> And when Ken Johnson's father was asked to play in the ship's first-class dining room (he was a pianist), the ship rolled so violently that the piano flew across the room.<sup>59</sup> Finally, as we shall see below, stormy, foggy and cold weather was the main cause behind some of the informants' perilous journey.

Bad weather and rough sea aggravated the conditions of those emigrants, a quite significant number it seems, that were prone to seasickness. Seasickness struck both men and women, young as well as old, though apparently children coped better with the queasiness caused by the ships' rolling. The consequences of seasickness on the emigrants' sleeping quarters can easily be imagined. In fact, several of the informants reveal the disgusting side of this quite common physical condition. Vera Tanner, for

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<sup>54</sup> Joseph Delaney, EI, 14.

<sup>55</sup> Kyffin Williams, EI, 35.

<sup>56</sup> Donald Roberts, EI, 4-5.

<sup>57</sup> Edward Brown, FWP, 2.

<sup>58</sup> William Whytock, FWP, 2.

<sup>59</sup> Ken Johnson, EI, p. 12.

instance, remembers that ‘everybody was sick, you know, and they didn’t care where they vomited. It was terrible.’<sup>60</sup>

Sea-sickness could strike a whole family – all four members of Mary Kendrick’s family were afflicted by it, for example<sup>61</sup> – though this does not seem to have been often the case. Some of the interviewees and their relatives felt sick during part of the trip, others for the entire journey. Tom Thomazin and his mother, for instance, felt queasy all the way over to America.<sup>62</sup> By contrast, Thomas Sargent, an eight-year-old child, was sick only the first day of the trip.<sup>63</sup> Finally, it is worth noting that sea-sickness did not relieve mothers of their duties. In fact, whether they travelled with their husbands or not, married women had to look after their children during the journey, just as they had done at home. This is the case of Frances Oakley’s mother, for example, who felt nauseous on the ship but had nonetheless a new-born baby to feed and take care of.<sup>64</sup> For a married woman with children, therefore, the trip was normally more tiring than for the rest of the family, as indeed had been the preparation for the trip.

The emigrants who enjoyed good health during the journey found various ways to spend their time. They went on deck for fresh air, as we have seen above, or took walks along the side of the ship, as was the case with Doreen Stenzel and her mother.<sup>65</sup> Some of the travellers, such as Robert Reese, ventured in the areas of the ship reserved for first and second-class passengers.<sup>66</sup> Despite his newly-wed wife being confined in her cabin feeling sick, Arnold Ambler also consciously trespassed on the second-class section of the ship. He justifies his behaviour pragmatically: ‘But I says well, I can’t help it. She can’t get up on deck, so I might as well enjoy myself.’<sup>67</sup> Still others had quite peculiar experiences: this was the case with Ken Johnson’s father who, as we have seen above, was invited to play the piano in the first-class passengers’ dining room.

Various forms of entertainment were available on board, one of the most popular of which was certainly dancing, whether spontaneous or organized.<sup>68</sup> This is actually

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<sup>60</sup> Vera Tanner, EI, 29.

<sup>61</sup> Mary Kendrick, EI, 23.

<sup>62</sup> Tom Thomazin, FWP, 1.

<sup>63</sup> Thomas Sargent, EI, 22.

<sup>64</sup> Frances Oakley, EI, 7.

<sup>65</sup> Doreen Stenzel, EI, 26.

<sup>66</sup> Robert Reese, EI, 31.

<sup>67</sup> Arnold Ambler, EI, 10.

<sup>68</sup> Angela McCarthy remarks that during the long journeys to Australasia lavish entertainment was offered to the travellers, while the transatlantic trips ‘tended to be poor in the way of entertainment, with passengers making their own festivities such as dancing, singing, playing music, and competing at shuffle board and cards.’ Angela McCarthy, *Personal Narratives of Irish and Scottish Migration, 1921-65*. ‘For

mentioned by various informants. As we have seen above, for example, there was dancing every night on the ship Robert Smalley boarded in 1875. Similarly, Helen Hansen, her sister and her mother attended night dances on the boat that took them from Scotland to America in 1923.<sup>69</sup> Elizabeth Nimmo also talks about “entertainment” on board the day before arrival – though she does not specify what kind of entertainment, music and dancing is probably what she was thinking about. It is also possible that such entertainment was available at some other days during the trip, since the informant had spent most of the time in her cabin due to seasickness.<sup>70</sup>

Children who were not too young or could not be restrained explored the ship and were involved in a variety of activities on board, some of them less than sensible. In truth, for many children the transatlantic journey seems to have been a time of fun rather than physical and emotional pain. Jack Carnegie for example, who unlike his mother was not sea sick, describes himself as a ‘pain in the neck’ during the passage. He was always running around the ship, and once ‘almost went down the garbage chute where they throw the garbage into the sea’, his brother promptly pulling him back.<sup>71</sup> Similarly, Jennie Jacobson roamed the boat and enjoyed herself during the crossing: ‘I was all over the ship. I wasn’t one to be still, I’d go see what people were doing and watching, some play cards and, but I, if there was music I’d be around.’<sup>72</sup> More examples are provided by Margaret Cook and Myrtle Berlinghoff, aged 9 and 7 respectively at the time of leaving. The former, along with some playmates, ‘got down in the engine room, but we were kicked out of there fast enough,’ whereas the latter and her sister made friends with the ship’s waiters who, among other things, let them lend a hand in setting the dining room tables. Their mother, in the meanwhile, was confined in the infirmary suffering from pneumonia.<sup>73</sup>

The transatlantic journey certainly constituted a special time in the migratory venture, and the ship delimited a peculiar space which affected the emigrants’ experience. Yet the ship was also, in many respects, a world in miniature, a place in which key events and circumstances of life were duplicated, though under unusual

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*Spirit and Adventure*’ (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2007), 102. Rather than *poor* in the provision of entertainment, the ships directed to Canada and the United States are perhaps better defined as *poorer* in their supply of amusements compared to the vessels heading for Australia and New Zealand.

<sup>69</sup> Helen Hansen, EI, 6.

<sup>70</sup> Elizabeth Nimmo, EI, 6.

<sup>71</sup> Jack Carnegie, EI, 9.

<sup>72</sup> Jennie Jacobson, EI, 5.

<sup>73</sup> Margaret Cook, EI, 38; Myrtle Berlinghoff, EI, 15.

conditions. Emigrants ate, slept, took care of themselves and of their children, made friends, interacted with each other and looked for fun on board. Inevitably, part of this floating world also involved illness and death. Indeed, some people fell ill during the ocean crossing. As we have seen above, for instance, Myrtle Berlinghoff and her sister walked around the ship whilst pneumonia kept mother confined in the infirmary. Furthermore, viruses could spread and epidemics break out during the passage. Though this was much more common in the previous period, especially in the sailing ship era, it also happened on twentieth century steamers. For example, an epidemic of smallpox broke out on the steamer Myrtle Berlinghoff's father boarded in 1920 (preceding the other members of his family to America). As a consequence, he was quarantined for about three weeks at Ellis island.<sup>74</sup> Indeed, as we shall see below, various other informants were quarantined on arrival due to the spread of diseases aboard their ships.

Passengers could also die during the journey, and thus travellers who crossed the Atlantic in the period under examination might witness burials at sea. Ellen Pierce, who left in 1920 when she was 15 years of age, distinctly remembers the solemn funeral ceremony which took place on the *Carmania*: 'Everybody had to be on deck to be at the service. And they had a piano there and a regular church service. And then after that, well, then, this must have been lowered, because we heard the body, we heard something drop in the water.'<sup>75</sup> There was also one such occurrence on the ship Kathleen Harlow and her family boarded in 1920. However, they were not allowed to attend, perhaps due to the informant's young age (she was only four at the time):

And we came out, and we were going up the steps one day and as we, as they opened the doorway to let us up to get outside on the ship, we couldn't go up because they were burying a man at sea. I remember that part. He'd fallen down the stairs in the storm, and they were burying him at sea.<sup>76</sup>

In conclusion, it is worth noting that several of the informants, unlike the majority of emigrants, had "adventurous" or even quite dangerous trips, which unsurprisingly they vividly recall. Frances Oakley, for instance, was crossing the ocean when World War I broke out. In order for the ship not to be intercepted by German U-boats, she

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<sup>74</sup> Myrtle Berlinghoff, EI, 11.

<sup>75</sup> Ellen Pierce, EI, 28.

<sup>76</sup> Kathleen Harlow, EI, 19.

remembers, all lights were turned off and the decision was made to head for Halifax, Nova Scotia, rather than the United States.<sup>77</sup>

Traumatic events and hazardous situations were frequently the consequence of bad weather and rough seas. Harry Norbury, for example, was heading for Ireland on the *Scythia* when, due to the thick fog, the ship was hit by the White Star liner *Cedric*. The passengers were made to wear lifebelts and started boarding the lifeboats. Then it was ascertained that the damage provoked by the collision was relatively minor, and thus the ship was able to reverse route and dock at Liverpool. Some of the passengers of the *Scythia* – the informant and his sisters among them – were taken to Southampton and transferred to the *Berengaria*.<sup>78</sup> Further examples are offered by Dorothy Warner's and Thomas Allan's testimonies. In fact, a severe storm sent the ship on which Dorothy Warner was travelling 200 miles off its course,<sup>79</sup> while Thomas Allan remembers that a fierce storm damaged the *Cameronia* so much that it had to stop at Halifax for emergency repairs before continuing its journey to New York, delaying arrival at the port of destination by more than two days.<sup>80</sup>

At other times it was the presence of large masses of floating ice in the ocean that created problems. Ship captains might opt for a longer but safer route to avoid accidents,<sup>81</sup> yet collisions with icebergs did happen occasionally. In fact, the steamer on which Robert Smalley was crossing the Atlantic entered ice-fields and hit an iceberg. Moreover, Smalley recalls, when they reached Newfoundland (they were directed to Canada), the ship grounded on a rock due to the foggy weather. Water flew inside the vessel and personal belongings went overboard. Fortunately, they were able to reach port despite 'eight feet of water in the boat.'<sup>82</sup> Likewise, Agnes Fairchild recalls that the ship on which she was travelling had to stop a whole night to repair the leak provoked by the collision with an iceberg. The informant describes the impact in broad but vivid strokes. The emphasis on commotion, noise, and scarce visibility, as well as the repetition of the verb "remember" (a clear indication of the deep trace left by this

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<sup>77</sup> Frances Oakley, EI, 7.

<sup>78</sup> Harry Norbury, EI, 6-7.

<sup>79</sup> Dorothy Warner, EI, 12.

<sup>80</sup> Thomas Allan, EI, 2, first interview; 12, second interview.

<sup>81</sup> The ship on which Ellen Pierce was travelling, for example, headed towards Halifax and landed there before reaching New York after a trip lasting two weeks (a rather long time in 1920). This course of action was dictated by the fact that, though they set sail in May, Greenland icebergs were still floating in the ocean. (Ellen Pierce, EI, 27, 29).

<sup>82</sup> Robert Smalley, FWP, 1.

episode on the informant's memory, also due to the risk run by her brother) gives some rhetorical force to her account:

I remember it was quite foggy, I remember that. And my brother, he used to play near the rail. And just before we hit the iceberg, he was sitting on the rail, and just got down. Otherwise, he would have been thrown into the water. But I remember this terrible jarring, and they say it's a – the captain seen the iceberg at the last minute and reversed the propeller. [...] And I remember that there was a terrible, terrible excitement, running all – people running all over – kids crying.<sup>83</sup>

Finally, Millvina Dean left England on the *Titanic*. She was only a few months old in 1912, and therefore her account is obviously based on her mother's memories. While her father lost his life in the tragic sinking of the ship *Millvina*, her little brother and her mother were rescued and returned to England after about a week in New York.<sup>84</sup> Apparently, it was sheer coincidence that the informant's family embarked on the *Titanic*:

Levine: [...] did your family, mother and father, want to go on the *Titanic*, particularly, since it was its maiden voyage?

Dean: Well, it was purely a coincidence, really, because we were going on another ship, and then they, last minute, my father heard from the shipping line to say there's a vacancy, there's been a cancellation on the *Titanic*, would you like to go? And he thought, "Absolutely wonderful."<sup>85</sup>

The entrance to harbour marked the end of the emigrants' journey, no matter how long, difficult, risky or perhaps not-too-unpleasant it might have been. As we have seen in the previous chapter, some emigrants were directed to Canada, while in a few cases the vessels on which the FWP informants travelled docked at ports other than New York. In 1854, for example, Joseph Smith and his family landed in New Orleans, and from there they headed for St. Louis.<sup>86</sup> Yet in the 1860-1930 period the great majority of emigrants, and of the informants whose life histories are examined in this work, landed in New York.

The positioning, in 1886, of the Statue of Liberty on what would be later known as Liberty Island and the opening of the new Ellis Island immigrant depot six years later transformed the appearance of the New York harbour, rendering it fundamentally similar to what it is today. This is how Sidney Pike, an eleven years old English boy who entered America in 1910, outlines the geography of the area which the emigrants'

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<sup>83</sup> Agnes Fairchild, EI, 22.

<sup>84</sup> Millvina Dean, EI, 6.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>86</sup> Joseph Smith, FWP, 1.

ships traversed before docking: ‘Up through the Narrows, Verrazzano Bridge wasn’t there, of course. Up through the Narrows, Governor’s Island on the right, and the Statue of Liberty on the left and then Ellis Island just adjacent to it.’<sup>87</sup> At the heart of New York’s harbour was the symbol of American freedom – a 151-foot copper statue which ‘had been a gift from France to the United States in celebration of the American centennial in 1876’<sup>88</sup> – by which the emigrants’ ships sailed and that visibly marked the longed-for end of the voyage and the entrance to the Promised Land.

## II. Sighting America

The Ellis Island Oral History Project interviews enable us to glimpse the emigrants’ feelings at the moment of arrival, which in the accounts is especially connected to the sighting of the Statue of Liberty – indeed, the guidelines used by the fieldworkers contains a few questions on seeing the Statue for the first time.<sup>89</sup>

The surge of emotions that many emigrants must have felt at arrival is relived by Arnold Ambler during his interview. It is conveyed by fragmented syntax and word repetition as well as betrayed by the informant’s coughing:

But the first thing you see is that Statue of Liberty. No kiddin’ about it. I .. I don’t – I’m not ashamed about that. (Coughs) You look at that, you say to yourself, yes, yes, no, no, thank you, you look at that, you say to yourself, this is, that’s it.<sup>90</sup>

Ambler’s emotional turmoil is mainly due to the fact that he is fully aware of finding himself at the very beginning of a new life, whose eventual outcome is unknown: ‘But there we are, and you are saying, no, why – what does my future hold for me?’<sup>91</sup> Thomas Sargent, as the quotation at the beginning of this chapter shows, also focuses on the Statue of Liberty, along with the New York skyscrapers, to express his sense of awe in the face of the life lying ahead of him.

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<sup>87</sup> Sidney Pike, EI, 11.

<sup>88</sup> Alan M. Kraut, *The Huddled Masses. The Immigrants in American Society, 1880-1921* (Arlington Heights, IL: Harlan Davidson, 1982), 1.

<sup>89</sup> This is not the case with the FWP life histories. To begin with, many of the British informants interviewed by the FWP fieldworkers moved to the United States before 1886. Furthermore, with regard to the FWP informants who arrived after the Statue of Liberty was placed in the New York harbour, we need to remember that comparatively little attention is paid generally to the pre-emigration and the ocean crossing phases in these accounts, and that no specific question about this was included in the fieldworkers’ manuals.

<sup>90</sup> Arnold Ambler, EI, 11.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.



Some emigrants felt enthusiastic at the idea of passing by the Statue of Liberty: Gladys Lambert, for example, could not wait to see it, as she had heard a lot about this symbol of immigrants' hopes before leaving.<sup>92</sup> Margaret Whittle was eager to come to America, and to reunite with her sisters. No wonder, therefore, that in her account the Statue epitomizes the long-awaited beginning of a new life:

Well, knowing how I felt about coming over and wanting to come and waiting, and I knew that my sisters would be there, I think it was the, the, most wonderful thing I'd ever seen. I thought now this is, this is beckoning me to a new start.<sup>93</sup>

Joseph Delaney remembers that, on entering New York's harbour, sighting the Statue of Liberty caused a great stir on the ship, people 'went crazy' and 'there was hollering and screaming.'<sup>94</sup> In Joseph Daly's testimony seeing the Statue also constitutes a climactic moment of the emigrants' voyage, preceding the anticlimax of the processing phase at Ellis Island. Daly conjures up a stereotypical image of the arrival of emigrants to the United States – the people crowding on deck, the commotion, the children lifted up by their parents to see the Statue. In other words, to describe this celebrated moment of the emigrants' saga the informant draws upon the collective imagination, while at the same time reinforcing it:

And ah, as we came into the lower bay, the Hudson Bay, and we were approaching the Statue of Liberty. Everybody was up on deck and they were holding me up so I could see it in the crowd. And I remember people weeping.<sup>95</sup>

The strong emphasis on the sighting of the Statue of Liberty in the Ellis Island narratives can be explained by the importance the Ellis Island Oral History Project fieldworkers give to the voyage and arrival phase of the emigration experience as much as by the actual memories of the informants. Indeed, the myth of the Statue of Liberty affects the perspective of the interviews and concretely translates into the questions fieldworkers ask about this topic. This is quite predictable, one might say, considering that the Ellis Island Immigration Museum, within which the Oral History Project has developed, is part of the Statue of Liberty National Monument. Yet the narratives show that passing by Liberty Island did not always constitute a climactic point of the

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<sup>92</sup> Gladys Lambert, EI, 37.

<sup>93</sup> Margaret Whittle, EI, 39.

<sup>94</sup> Joseph Delaney, EI, 15.

<sup>95</sup> John Daly, EI, 18.

emigrants' journey, and some of the interviewees did not attach as much importance to the moment of entering New York's harbour as the fieldworkers might have expected (and perhaps taken for granted, give the celebratory slant of their approach). Actually, some of the informants do not even mention or recall seeing the Statue. To begin with, children who were very young at the time of emigration often did not remember much about the trip, including the moment of arrival. An example is provided by Arthur Dickson, who was four when he left on the *Olympic* from Southampton in 1925.<sup>96</sup> Furthermore, it is quite unlikely that they knew or fully understood what the Statue of Liberty (or Ellis Island, for that matter) was. Kathleen Harlow, for instance, was only four when she left England. When her mother held her up on deck she did not realize she was looking at the symbol of American freedom, and thought Ellis Island was her aunt's home, the place to which she had been told they were directed. Interestingly, the first part of the following passage also reveals the point of view (in a literal, physical sense) of a young child on deck at arrival:

As I say, the first thing I saw, I was so short and little that I was usually surrounded by legs and skirts and things and couldn't see an awful lot. But when we, my mother and my father held me up so I could see Ellis Island, and I thought that was my aunt's house.<sup>97</sup>

The sight of the Statue of Liberty might have left no trace in the memory of older children, either. This is the case with Ralph Crollick, who was ten at the time of emigration but recalls virtually nothing about the trip, not even coming into New York's harbour.<sup>98</sup> Likewise, several adult emigrants do not mention or emphasize seeing the Statue of Liberty in their accounts. Robert Reese, for example, merely hints at having caught sight of the Statue, but this does not seem to have been a particularly emotional moment of his trip,<sup>99</sup> while Harry Norbury talks about the difficult beginning of his journey (the collision with another vessel and the change of ship) and then goes on to narrate his experience at Ellis Island.<sup>100</sup>

It is also worth noting that, to those who may not have been particularly enthusiastic about seeing the Statue or may even have been unaware of what it represented, the fact

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<sup>96</sup> Arthur Dickson, EI, 10. The informant does not even recall the kind of accommodation his family had on the ship, though he thinks they travelled steerage since they were poor. Indeed, as when he discusses the reasons his family had for leaving (see Chapter 3), Dickson relies on common experience to fill his memory's gaps.

<sup>97</sup> Kathleen Harlow, EI, 21.

<sup>98</sup> Ralph Crollick, EI, p. 14.

<sup>99</sup> Robert Reese, EI, 32.

<sup>100</sup> Harry Norbury, EI, 7-8.

that Miss Liberty constituted a key symbol of America was often brought home by fellow travellers and, in general, by the behaviour of other people on the ship. Someone urged Phyllis Spinney to ‘come upon deck and see the Statue of Liberty’, for instance, whilst Ellen Pierce recalls that the American national anthem was played when they sailed past the Statue.<sup>101</sup> Finally, Kyffin Williams was shown the Statue by the man he was travelling with, who had previously emigrated to the United States. Apparently, Williams did not know much about this emblem of American democracy, nor had he been longing to see it. Indeed, what his fellow traveller said to him reveals that the myth of the Statue of Liberty was essentially constructed and circulated in America, and that its projection might not necessarily have reached people living overseas:

This man that was with me, this Dave Lloyd, ‘Say,’ he said, ‘Come over here.’ I remember quite well. ‘You see that over there?’ I said, ‘Yes.’ ‘It’s what they call the Statue of Liberty.’ When we were passing it with the boat. ‘Statue of Liberty. Take a good look at it. *You are going to hear plenty about that Statue of Liberty*’.<sup>102</sup>

### III. Island of fears

Island of hope, island of tears. This is how Ellis Island was known to millions of emigrants who had to go through its web of controls: hope to pass the tests to which they were subjected, tears when they were detained in a prison-like environment or shipped back to Europe.

Rather than a place of hopes and tears, or perhaps in addition to that, Ellis Island could be defined as an island of *fears*. Indeed, as Alan M. Kraut points out, ‘[a]lthough the time spent at the island depot was usually only a few hours, the experience was, for many immigrants, the most traumatic part of their voyage to America.’<sup>103</sup> Actually, the essence of the emigrants’ experience seems to have been the worry not to be able to take the final crucial step of their journey, after coming such a long way. Fear of not getting through the Golden Door, of the physical inspection and the officials’ interrogation, of detention, rejection and the alien people by whom they found themselves surrounded. Jack Carnegie, for instance, recalls that his mother was very concerned about the examination process and the possibility that they would be sent back, while Cyril

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<sup>101</sup> Phyllis Spinney, EI, 12; Ellen Pierce, EI, 29.

<sup>102</sup> Kyffin Williams, EI, 37, emphasis added.

<sup>103</sup> Kraut, *The Huddled Masses*, 55.

Cheeseman lays emphasis on the anxiety generated by the practice of separating men and women and the fear the members of a family felt of being unable to reunite with their relatives later on.<sup>104</sup>

The informants' unpleasant experience at Ellis Island contrasted with the idea emigrants had formed of America before departure. Some of the emigrants perceived the contradiction more than others, and commented upon it during the interview. Ellen Pierce, for instance, did not understand why her father was subjected to such thorough questioning and why their luggage was carefully searched. Truly, she did not expect this treatment in America: 'I thought we were coming to a free country. Why all this questioning and all this stuff? I was getting puzzled. And then he had my dad open all the barrels of stuff and suitcases. We had to open all them, take everything out.'<sup>105</sup> Little wonder, then, that the Ellis Island stage of the emigration process is etched on the memory of many informants.

Before dealing with the various trials newcomers had to face, however, it is worth noting that some of them recall only dimly or do not remember at all their passage through Ellis Island, usually because they were (very) young at the time of arrival. For these emigrants, therefore, the entry process ordeal was just a story somebody else told. This is the case with Agnes Fairchild, aged ten when she entered the U.S. in 1911, who preserves hazy memories of the processing phase,<sup>106</sup> and with Archibald Webster, who was only three years old at the time of leaving. Discussing his family's detention at Ellis Island, Webster states: 'the only thing I can remember them talking about [is] the fact that they were kept a day, overnight [...].'<sup>107</sup> The fact that the informant has completely forgotten this episode is marked by the use of the pronoun "they", instead of "we", to relate an event which also involved him. In other words, the informant is merely reporting his relatives' words (he recalls them *talking about* detention). Of course, some emigrant children do remember the passage through Ellis Island. Frances Oakley, who was six at the time, offers an interesting description of it from the point of view of a child (clearly drawing on her own memories, rather than her parents'). Her account is made up of brief snapshots tracing the main steps of the processing phase:

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<sup>104</sup> Jack Carnegie, EI, 4; Cyril Cheeseman, EI, 8.

<sup>105</sup> Ellen Pierce, EI, 32.

<sup>106</sup> Agnes Fairchild, EI, 25.

<sup>107</sup> Archibald Webster, EI, 14.

I remember the long lines. What bothered me most were the eyes. They pulled down your eyes and looked in your eyes, and they grabbed him. My mother said, "Don't you hurt this baby." You know, they were looking at the baby. They were looking for jaundice, like, yellow eyes. That's the first thing, jaundice. And, uh, oh, we went through line after line. Then we had interviews. I remember sitting on a bench while mother was in there answering questions.<sup>108</sup>

At Ellis Island, all immigrants were essentially subjected to the same procedures.<sup>109</sup> Various informants mention the confusion and the mass of people moving, or rather "being moved", from one stage of the processing phase to the next. As the following two quotations show, Myrtle Berlinghoff remembers Ellis Island as a frightening place where people were treated gruffly. In her opinion, this was obviously due to the fact that the new arrivals were *foreigners* seeking admission to the country:

Levine: Well, [...] what were your first impression of Ellis Island?

Berlinghoff: Very scary. (she laughs) Very.

Levine: What did you see?

Berlinghoff: There was just a mob of people all around you. You know, it was so crowded. It was terrible. And they just, you know, pushed you around as if you were dirt.<sup>110</sup>

[...] they treated you as if you were just below them, you know. Uh, I can't explain what I'm, as if you were nothing and they were everything. They were very superior to you because you were just coming in. You were foreigners.<sup>111</sup>

In their narratives, informants often resort to the metaphor of cattle to describe the general atmosphere at the immigrant depot and the brusque way in which new arrivals were treated. Henry Cohen, for example, describes Ellis Island as a place of suffering and physical constraint, where people were crammed in small spaces, like animals:

It looked like a bunch of, uh, cattle pens. That's what it looked to me like. And there was, uh, I never saw such a, there were thousands of people there. And they had detained several old Jewish men, and one of them was crying, sitting next to me.<sup>112</sup>

Along with, and often connected to, the image of cattle shoved around the rooms and corridors of Ellis Island's main building, it is the metaphor of prison (or one of its variants) that recurs in the informants' accounts. Being "fenced in" was an experience that many immigrants did not forget and attempted to express effectively during the

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<sup>108</sup> Frances Oakley, EI, 13.

<sup>109</sup> An apt description of the various steps of the Ellis Island processing, which follows a single immigrant through the entire inspection procedure is provided in Kraut, *The Huddled Masses*, 55-59.

<sup>110</sup> Myrtle Berlinghoff, EI, 17-18.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>112</sup> Henry Cohen, EI, 24.

interview. As we have seen above, for example, Henry Cohen employs the term *cattle pens*, blending the two images perfectly. Furthermore, Ellen Pierce explicitly likens the Great Hall to a prison, while Mary Williams talks about ‘chicken wire’ delimiting the space where immigrants were ushered (which, in this context, obviously reminds one of *barbed wire*):

We saw this big building, and then the ship stopped, and then everybody got off and we just, like, herded like a cattle, a bunch of cattle. So we followed the rest of them to where they were going. And as we entered this big room it looked like jail or something, and we were put into one of them.<sup>113</sup>

But when we came to this country to Ellis Island there were a lot of Irish people, and all nationalities I’ll say. And we, of course, we were hoarded [sic] just like cattle in Ellis Island into these cubicles that were like, they were fenced in rooms. They were fenced in almost with chicken wire I will say.<sup>114</sup>

Finally, Jack Carnegie recalls the crowd slowly moving along in the Great Hall, waiting to go through the various processing stages; he also recollects the tags that were attached to the emigrants’ clothes and the officials calling people out by their identification number.<sup>115</sup> Interestingly, the informant passes a comment contrasting the past with the contemporary immigration phenomenon in the United States – things worked quite differently then, while today immigrants ‘come into this country to go onto Welfare’ – which reveals his present anti-immigration feelings.<sup>116</sup> Opinions such as the one expressed by Jack Carnegie prove that past experiences can be used as a foil to the present, that present concerns often emerge through the narration of past events, and that present and past perspectives coexist in oral history, as we have observed in Chapter 1. Yet it is perhaps worth noting that emigrants voicing anti-immigration feelings do not necessarily substitute a past outlook with a present-driven perspective. Many of the emigrants coming from Great Britain were prejudiced and intolerant of others, and did not see themselves and the other newcomers as essentially belonging to the same social group. It is therefore possible that Jack Carnegie viewed immigrants suspiciously at the time of his emigration to America as well.

In this connection it deserves to be underlined that, if some of the British emigrants might not have shared sleeping quarters and/or other facilities with people of different nationalities during the journey, close contact with foreigners was unavoidable on Ellis

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<sup>113</sup> Ellen Pierce, EI, 31.

<sup>114</sup> Mary Williams, EI, 16.

<sup>115</sup> Jack Carnegie, EI, 9.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 10.

Island. Emigrants from different areas of Europe were audibly and visually “other”. They could arouse curiosity, though they were more often looked at with suspicion. Thomas Allan, for example, recalls being scared by the babble of voices speaking in incomprehensible languages,<sup>117</sup> while Sidney Pike was baffled by the sound of the foreign tongues he heard at Ellis Island and by the strange ways in which people were dressed; in particular, his attention was drawn by women wearing babushkas.<sup>118</sup> One of the factors that made Florence Norris’s experience at Ellis Island unpleasant was the presence of other immigrants, in particular of the “southern European noisy kind”: ‘And everybody was pushing me around it and oh, the Italians and the children crying and oh, it was really nerve wracking.’<sup>119</sup>

By contrast, the Great Hall could witness fleeting moments of interethnic encounter involving British immigrants. In fact, Kathleen Harlow was fascinated by children playing near her who were dressed in ‘colourful costumes, wearing babushkas and speaking mysterious foreign tongues.’ Their visible and audible otherness left a deep trace in Kathleen’s memory. The informant also recalls that her mother encouraged her to offer biscuits to these children, and that they became friendly with each other: ‘[...] they each took one, and they smiled and I smiled, and the next thing you know we were just jigging around together. We had no idea what the other one was saying, but we smiled and we shared cookies and it was a very happy situation.’<sup>120</sup>

Some of the interviewees went through the examination and questioning process at Ellis Island relatively quickly. At times they connect this to the impression they had of being different from other immigrants, and therefore of being treated better by American officials at Ellis Island. Robert Reese, for instance, claims that it did not take him long to be processed: in his opinion the “Anglo-Saxons” were passed through sooner than people of other nationalities.<sup>121</sup> Similarly, Arnold Ambler believes that newcomers from England and Scotland were treated better than other immigrants during the medical inspection, and recalls that many people of different nationalities were rejected.<sup>122</sup> Certainly, English-speaking immigrants did not need the help of an

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<sup>117</sup> Thomas Allan, EI, 13 second interview.

<sup>118</sup> Sidney Pike, EI, 12.

<sup>119</sup> Florence Norris, EI, 10-11. Indeed, the informant repeats her disparaging remarks on the Italians and their children twice (see also *Ibid.*, 7).

<sup>120</sup> Kathleen Harlow, EI, 22.

<sup>121</sup> Robert Reese, EI, 33.

<sup>122</sup> Arnold Ambler, EI, 13-14.

interpreter,<sup>123</sup> and this speeded things up. However, there might also have been an element of prejudice in the American officials which prompted them to examine eastern and southern Europeans more carefully. Indeed, the episode recounted by Ettie Glaser corroborates this contention. Ettie and her sister, whose surname was Levitsky, were detained for a few days. Officials, the informant says, thought they were Russian or Polish, and so led them to a huge dormitory lined with small cots with no blankets or pillows. However, as soon as the informant produced her passport, proving she was a British subject, she and her sister were accompanied to different quarters and began to be treated with more consideration.<sup>124</sup> Not all British immigrants had the same perception, though. Mary Dunn, in fact, did not notice any discrepancy in the way officials acted towards her because she spoke English. Indeed, she felt all newcomers were treated with disrespect, 'like immigrants' rather than persons. And this strongly clashed with the idealized image of America she had formed beforehand:

Mrs. Dunn: Well. They just treated you like immigrants. Some of them, I think, felt you should stay in your own country. What do you want to come here for?

Mr. Cumb: That's interesting. How did you get that impression?

Mrs. Dunn: Well, I just, the attitude of some of them, the way they kind pushed you around, you know. I cried many times, you know, wishing I had never come. (She laughs) [...]

Mrs. Dunn: [...] We had heard so many things about the United States, come to America and the gold and money grows on the trees and all this kind of stuff. And the land of opportunity, is this the way they treat everybody when they come in? You know. They really treated you like they didn't want you.<sup>125</sup>

The medical inspection was a crucial moment of the processing phase. A lot was at stake, and a great sense of relief was felt when it was finally over. Men and women were segregated, and they were asked to take off all or most of their clothes so that they could be thoroughly examined, in what must have been an embarrassing situation for most and humiliating for some. This was indeed a circumstance emigrants did not forget, as the quotation from Joseph Delaney's testimony reproduced at the beginning of this chapter shows. Eleanor Lenhart remembers she was 'scared to death' during the processing phase, because nobody explained to the emigrants what they were going to do, and still recalls vividly the stripping and the eye inspection, which evidently left a deep trace in her memory:

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<sup>123</sup> Some immigrants from Great Britain were mistaken for non-English speaking people and consequently addressed by an interpreter. This is what happened to Henry Cohen, who was spoken to in Yiddish due to his Jewish ancestry (Henry Cohen, EI, 23). This gives us a glimpse of the usual interrogation procedure applied with the great majority of the immigrants who went through Ellis Island.

<sup>124</sup> Ettie Glaser, EI, 10-11; 14.

<sup>125</sup> Mary Dunn, EI, 16.



[...] there were, um, two women doctors standing at the door with sticks in their hands and they grabbed you and rolled your eyelids up on the stick, looking for this infectious disease of some kind, and I don't remember the name of it. Uh, and then we were sent inside and, um, uh, told to strip to the waist.<sup>126</sup>

Mary Dunn did not understand why she had to be examined again at Ellis Island, despite having been seen by a doctor before departure. Interestingly, her words reveal she had been told about the mechanics of the processing phase by other emigrants. Those who had already gone through America's Golden Door evidently provided future emigrants with essential information about the Ellis Island ordeal, in order to prepare them for what lay ahead:

Well, I think in my own mind I wondered when I had gone through, because I'd gone through all these preliminary health thing I got a visa. And I'm saying to myself, "Why do I have to go through all this again?" But people had told me ahead of time, people that had come to this country in the earlier years had told me! "You'll be sorry, you know, when you get to Ellis Island."<sup>127</sup>

Finally, Sidney Pike clearly remembers the doctor who told him, at the end of the examination, that he was in good health and then welcomed him to America.<sup>128</sup> Doctors were obviously aware that emigrants particularly feared the physical inspection and therefore, occasionally, showed sympathy towards them.

For some of the newcomers the Ellis Island ordeal did not last only a few hours. In fact, detention was an uncommon but certainly not an absolutely exceptional occurrence in the immigration centre.<sup>129</sup> Detention was mainly, though not exclusively, a consequence of health problems. It represented an emotionally distressing experience, aggravated by the fact that male and female members of the same family were kept in different areas of the building and children might also be separated from their parents. Mary Williams, for instance, remembers that detention was particularly stressful for her mother. In fact, Mary's little brother was taken to the infirmary and remained under observation for many days. The informant's mother was not allowed to see her child and became so upset that she hoped they would be sent back home.<sup>130</sup> Phyllis Spinney

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<sup>126</sup> Eleanor Lenhart, EI, 7-8.

<sup>127</sup> Mary Dunn, EI, 20.

<sup>128</sup> Sidney Pike, EI, 15.

<sup>129</sup> In fact, for a variety of reasons, the number of detentions 'was often as high as 20 per cent on an annual basis, but over half of those detained were held only temporarily for minor health problems or until funds arrived. Only about 1 percent of the annual total were hospitalized.' Kraut, *The Huddled Masses*, 59.

<sup>130</sup> Mary Williams, EI, 17.

also portrays her stay at Ellis Island in dark colours. After a very unpleasant journey over – she had been terribly sick for 5 days on the ship – the informant was quarantined for a week. Various unpleasant memories surface in the interview: the medical examinations she was subjected to, the long waiting, her boredom, the bad quality of the food she was given and the discomfort for having to sleep in the same room with many other people.<sup>131</sup> Thomas Allan was also quarantined, because his brother had contracted chicken pox on the boat. He remembers feeling like a prisoner during detention; it was such an unpleasant period as to make him wish to return to Scotland.<sup>132</sup> Both Thomas and his brother felt ‘scared in a strange land’ and ‘terrified’ because they were alone; in fact, they had not been accompanied by their parents and could not receive visitors since they were in quarantine. What was already a trying experience for an adult could evidently be much harder for a child (Thomas Allan was nine at the time of emigration): ‘my first impressions of Ellis Island were indeed [as] the Island of Tears’.<sup>133</sup>

In some cases detention was brief, in others it could last for weeks. Archibald Webster’s family, for example, was kept overnight at Ellis Island because one of the informant’s brothers had an eye infection.<sup>134</sup> By contrast, Donald Roberts’s mother remained in hospital for two weeks, due to a suspected case of tuberculosis, while her family waited for her to be discharged.<sup>135</sup> Finally, Agnes Schilling, a 15 years old girl who was travelling alone, was detained for 10 days. Her young age certainly contributes to explaining the emotional reaction she had to this unsettling experience – she fretted and cried, and was desperately afraid of not being admitted. This prompted a sympathetic response on the part of the medical staff, which made her confinement bearable. Indeed, during the interview she employed words such as ‘pleasant’ and ‘wonderful’ to describe her detention period, showing that she really appreciated (and did not expect) such compassionate treatment from nurses and doctors.<sup>136</sup>

Emigrants who were detained but not hospitalized could breathe some fresh air in the big yard outside the building for a couple of hours a day. Patrick Peak, for example, recalls spending time outdoor with his father and sibling while they were staying at Ellis

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<sup>131</sup> Phyllis Spinney, EI, 13-16.

<sup>132</sup> Thomas Allan, EI, 2-4.

<sup>133</sup> Thomas Allan, EI, 8, first interview.

<sup>134</sup> Archibald Webster, EI, 14.

<sup>135</sup> Donald Roberts, EI, 5.

<sup>136</sup> Agnes Schilling, EI, 6. The visits of her friends, the people who were waiting for her and would later on take her to their home in Newark, also made her confinement more tolerable (Ibid., 7).

Island waiting for his mother to be released.<sup>137</sup> The hospital rooms overlooked the yard, and thus members of the same family could see each other and alleviate the misery of separation:

Now um, during the days that we were waiting there we would be let out in the morning and the afternoon for an hour or so to get some exercise in the yard. And the yard had a high fence about fifteen feet high, a wire fence. And once in a while we could look across the way and we could see my mother at the window of the hospital. I was, oh I guess, it was about five or six stories high, something like that, the building there. And she would wave to us kids and my father. And of course we could see everything going on in the Harbor. And, uh, that's how the days went by.<sup>138</sup>

One of the elements that made Phyllis Spinney's detention at Ellis Island an unpleasant experience, as we have seen above, was the bad quality of the food. Similarly, Ettie Glaser, who remained confined for three days with her sister, remembers vividly the 'slop', as she defines it, that immigrants were given to eat. Interestingly, the informant says that the food was perhaps good enough for people of other nationalities, due to their different standards and, so to speak, "intensity of hunger":

I guess if, maybe because if you're English, your [sic] used to better food. I wouldn't say the best, but better food. Whereas the other people, maybe to them it was good. Maybe they didn't have it as well where they came from. So I really can't speak for them, but I imagine that they, the food was good to them because they were hungry people. They were all hungry people.<sup>139</sup>

Clearly, Ettie Glaser considered herself a special kind of immigrant, with *higher* expectations and standards, because she was English. Her words are qualified, though, and do not convey an openly racist attitude towards the other newcomers, which is instead evident in the accounts of some interviewees. In fact, being detained meant coming in prolonged close contact with people of other nationalities, whose presence had been inescapable in the Great Hall and during the medical inspection process but whom, in that context, could have been more easily tolerated. This protracted encounter might unleash strong ethnic prejudice, fostered by the strain under which the emigrants found themselves. Quite naturally, emigrants tended to rely on kinship and nationality ties to cope with such a difficult situation. What Harry Norbury remembers best about his detention experience, for example, is the babble of foreign voices and the arguing

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<sup>137</sup> Patrick Peak, EI, 9-10.

<sup>138</sup> Donald Roberts, EI, 7-8.

<sup>139</sup> Ettie Glaser, EI, 16.

late at night in the dormitory, as well as the fact that he spent time with a fellow Scotchman.<sup>140</sup> Donald Roberts's testimony supplies a glaring example of intolerant narrow-mindedness. He portrays the other immigrants as greedy and filthy savages, and denies them a specific identity ('these Southern Europeans *and whatever*' he calls them). It is the Anglo-Saxon sense of superiority towards inferior, uncivilized breeds that clearly surfaces in his words:

[...] the breakfast were invariably eggs and the eggs were cooked in big wire baskets and they would bring these wire baskets and set them on the table. And before they'd be on the table these people, these southern Europeans and whatever, we thought they were savages because they acted like that. They'd be grabbing these eggs and breaking them open and egg yolk would be running down their faces and we were brought up to wait until everybody was ready to eat and so on. And we just couldn't adjust to that situation, you know. It was, it was a bizarre thing. I really, I really was shocked, and even when I think of it now I think, my goodness, it gives me the shivers, sometimes I think of it. And they would take bread almost from under your nose and snatch the stuff away from you.<sup>141</sup>

Similarly, Edith Ryan's words betray a prejudiced outlook. Though the episode she recounts might well have happened, she portrays people speaking foreign languages as threatening and unkind, even to children:

My little girl was sitting in the middle of a mattress. See, you had to get your own mattress. You had to sleep on the mattress. And she was sitting in the middle of the mattress looking very tired, and somebody came speaking a foreign language, Spanish or Italian, and snatched the mattress from under her and the poor kid went rolling over, you know.<sup>142</sup>

Not only were the immigrants physically inspected. After they had reunited in the great registry hall they waited to be brought before a "judge", as many of the informants say, who asked them a number of questions – among them, why they wanted to enter the United States, who was going to claim them, where they would live, how they would support themselves in the new country. Arnold Ambler, for instance, was asked the reason why he was immigrating, what he expected to do in America and how much money he had with him.<sup>143</sup> Eleanor Lenhart sketches the scene of what must have been a rather typical interrogation concisely and effectively. She remembers that the questioning was relatively short, and that the official had a matter-of-fact, rather gruff, attitude. He posed a number of standard questions and had a set of forms to fill out.

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<sup>140</sup> Harry Norbury, EI, 8-10.

<sup>141</sup> Donald Roberts, EI, 6-7.

<sup>142</sup> Edith Ryan, EI, 7.

<sup>143</sup> Arnold Ambler, EI, 17.

Evidently, what for the newcomers constituted an unsettling experience, for the official was just humdrum routine.<sup>144</sup>

The judge interviewed the household head but could also address the other members of the family. Thus, in the case of Joseph Delaney most of the questions were addressed to his widowed mother while Joseph, despite being nineteen years old, was only asked to confirm he intended to work as a miner.<sup>145</sup> Delaney also remembers that his family had to prove their financial self-sufficiency by showing the official their landing money.<sup>146</sup> Indeed, immigrants needed to prove that they were in possession of a certain amount of cash to ensure they would not become charges on the public purse. As Kyffin Williams puts it: '[w]ell, when you get to New York, they examine you and they want to know how much money you got and if you haven't got enough money they won't let you land. You've got to have money, you're not going to live on no relief.'<sup>147</sup> Similarly, Mary Dunn, whose ship docked at Ellis Island in 1923, recalls that emigrants were supposed to have the equivalent of \$50 with them, and that the judge actually enquired about the sum she was in possession of.<sup>148</sup> Having to show the officials one's landing money could create embarrassing situations, especially for women, as in the case of Florence Norris: '[...] he says, "Where is it?" I said, "It's down here in my corset." "Open it up, bring it up, let me see it." So I had to get my twenty seven pounds out of my chest, you know, and bring it up and let him count it.'<sup>149</sup>

Joseph Delaney's testimony also provides a glimpse of the patriotic speech immigrants had to hear during the interrogation, and of their possible reaction to it. In fact, the informant was far from impressed by the judge's words and appeared to be much more interested in just moving to the next stage:

Delaney: The attendants there. Oh, yeah, they brought you in and then the .. the .. bailiff called your name, the Mrs. O'Neill family, and we went before the judge. He gave his spiel then.

Gumb: What was his spiel?

Delaney: About America, she needed strong supporters that wanted to be Americans. She had a proud heritage, and all that stuff, okay. We were wishin' to get through with the spiel, to get to the point.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Eleanor Lenhart, EI, 21.

<sup>145</sup> Joseph Delaney, EI, 25; 29.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>147</sup> Kyffin Williams, EI, 35.

<sup>148</sup> Mary Dunn, EI, 18.

<sup>149</sup> Florence Norris, EI, 11.

<sup>150</sup> Joseph Delaney, EI, 26.

Emigrants needed a sponsor to be allowed to enter the United States. Actually, various Ellis Island interviewees mention being “claimed” by family, friends, or even mere acquaintances. Arthur Dickson and his family emigrated in 1925. Their relatives, the informant recalls, had to declare that they would provide lodging and means of support for the newcomers until the household head found employment.<sup>151</sup> William McGuire’s father, who also left in the 1920s, was sponsored by his sister and brother-in-law, who ‘signed a paper to get him to America’<sup>152</sup> while ‘a man by the name of Bob Christie’ sponsored Jack Carnegie’s father in the late 1910s or early 1920s,<sup>153</sup> finally, in order to meet the needs of bureaucracy, the Powells, who emigrated in 1913, relied on the assistance of an acquaintance of theirs working on New York’s docks.<sup>154</sup>

Once they had successfully passed the medical inspection and satisfied the needs of government bureaucracy many immigrants – though by no means all, as we shall see below – were welcomed at Ellis Island by family or friends who had preceded them in America. For example, Harry Sonnes’s father picked up his wife and children after they had successfully gone through all the complicated processing procedures, and together they finally took a ferry to the mainland.<sup>155</sup> Reunion with one’s relatives was obviously a moment for which emigrants longed. Gladys Lambert effectively expresses the happiness she felt at reuniting with her father in America: ‘Oh, the minute I looked at his face I said, “Thank God.” Oh, it was wonderful to see his face.’<sup>156</sup> Similarly, Margaret Whittle was elated and relieved when she saw her two sisters waiting for her. Actually, she caught sight of them *before* entering the main building. Her words convey the enthusiasm most immigrants must have felt in similar circumstances: ‘[...] as soon as I saw them, of course, I put my case down and my hands went up. But they had to bring me back, and I was half way across the, the entrance, you know, to get to them, you know, but it was the most wonderful thing.’<sup>157</sup> The intensity and nature of the emotions immigrants felt also depended on the amount of time they had been separated

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<sup>151</sup> Arthur Dickson, EI, 8.

<sup>152</sup> William McGuire, EI, 9. The date of emigration of the informant’s father is not specified. Presumably, it was in the mid-1920s, since the informant and the remainder of his family left in 1928 (when William was a seven years old child).

<sup>153</sup> Jack Carnegie, EI, 5. Once again, the interview only tells us that the informant and the remainder of his family joined the household head in 1921, and that the informant’s father had emigrated after the end of the war. Considering that the informant arrived in America at the end of October of 1921 (Ibid., 10), Jack Carnegie’s father must have left between 1919 and 1920 (or early 1921).

<sup>154</sup> Thomas Powell, EI, 25.

<sup>155</sup> Harry Sonnes, EI, 6; 12.

<sup>156</sup> Gladys Lambert, EI, 38.

<sup>157</sup> Margaret Whittle, EI, 40.

from their family. Thomas Allan, for instance, remembers feeling very cheerful when he finally reunited with his father, but also that after 5 years of separation he seemed like a stranger to him.<sup>158</sup>

The experience most emigrants went through at Ellis Island is usefully summarized by the following excerpt, taken from Thomas Sargent's interview. Sargent provides a vivid and detailed description of the various stages of the processing phase. The informant's narration has a noticeable rhetorical quality conveyed by the rhythm of the spoken discourse, fragmented syntax and the emphatic repetition of words. The passage is tightly knit and some of its sentences possess a graphic poetical force, as in the incremental accumulation of participial forms – 'the wailing and the crying, the shouting, the pushing and the shoving' – describing the chaotic and unsettling dynamics of people's condition within Ellis Island's main hall. It is indeed worth quoting at length:

Sargent: I know we were all standing up, with a tug alongside of us, and they took us over to Ellis Island. And this was the dramatic part of it where we were taken down right straight into, towards the Great Hall. Than we were stopped and checked for, by Immigration as to who we were and where we came from, and then we were led up the steps over the Great, adjacent to the Great Hall, you know, the balcony area. And that area, at one level there was a doctor, and he looked into your eyes, and another one on the upper level checked your chest and blood pressure and ask you lots of questions about your health, particularly Mother. And then we went, as I recall, down around and back down again into the Great Hall, and there were benches and seats, and you were allotted a certain area where you were, to go down and be processed. This took, I don't know, an hour, two hours, two or three hours. We went through the, through this line and the thing I was really impressed with was the fact that the noise, the wailing and the crying, the shouting, the pushing and the shoving.

Moore: Was it crowded, then?

Sargent: It was crowded, and people were being separated. In other words the husband might have a case of TB, so he couldn't come in, and he was shunted off to another place, and left the children and the mother, and they were crying. It was just a horrible experience, it really was. We finally got up to the, to the desk. And they asked Mother where she was going, and she said, "New London Connect-ticut." And the man laughed at her because she pronounced Connecticut incorrectly. And they put tags around your neck, big tags, which said your name, Great Britain, New London, Connecticut, as I recall, something like that. And then they shunted us back on the ferry, I guess it was a ferry, and took us to the Battery.<sup>159</sup>

#### **IV. Between two worlds**

Sad partings from family and friends preceded the emigrants' journey, as shown at the end of Chapter 3. A variety of feelings accompanied departure: expectations, hopes, worries and sorrow, often experienced at the same time in an unsettling emotional

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<sup>158</sup> Thomas Allan, EI, 14.

<sup>159</sup> Thomas Sargent, EI, 25-26.

turmoil. Yet it was sadness at what they were leaving behind and worry at the trials they had to face and the unpredictability of life in a foreign land that often prevailed. These were probably the feelings that accompanied many emigrants on their transatlantic voyage, as the testimony of Agnes Schilling reveals, though in her case discomfort was probably aggravated by the fact that she travelled alone: ‘the journey over I began to have regrets about leaving home. I was feeling very lonesome, sorry for myself, crying all the time. And I don’t remember if I went to Ellis Island alone or everybody went, but I was always afraid of Ellis Island.’<sup>160</sup>

The sources analyzed in this study illuminate many facets of the journey experience, the mood in which emigrants’ were during the trip being only one of them. Recurring patterns in the transatlantic crossing can be identified, yet journeys could be very different from one another. Indeed, as we have seen, some of the informants preserved few or no memories at all of the trip and the processing phase at Ellis Island, usually because they were very young at the time of leaving. For them, therefore, there was no conscious experience of the voyage. Furthermore, dissimilarities have emerged between the experiences at sea of male, female, adult and child emigrants. The physical inspection on arrival was also a crucial moment of the transatlantic move, which could make a great difference for those who were detained at Ellis Island. Finally, mere chance, such as being hit by a fierce storm or colliding with an iceberg – could determine the eventful character of an emigrant’s journey.

The historical period in which emigrants departed affected their journey, the main turning point being represented by the switch from the age of the sailing ship to that of the steam vessel. As we have seen, emigrants who travelled in the sailing ship era faced a very long trip and had to cope with bad food and appalling conditions on steerage. The voyage became much faster and far more comfortable on steamers, with the 20<sup>th</sup> century vessels featuring a third class and often taking no more than a week to cross the Atlantic. Indeed, while a few of the Ellis Island informants complained about both accommodation and the quality of the fare on board, most found them unobjectionable, also because they were not used to luxuries at home. Travelling steerage or third-class on a steamer could still be quite unpleasant, though: it was crowded below deck, and the conditions were stifling. By contrast, the trip was much more comfortable for those who

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<sup>160</sup> Agnes Schilling, EI, 4.



had bought a second class ticket, but these were only a few exceptions in the corpora of sources analyzed in this work.

Furthermore, the weather was often bad and the sea rough during the crossing. The inevitable consequence of travelling in a buffeted ship was that seasickness struck many passengers. This rendered them miserable, sometimes for the whole or most of the trip, and transformed their sleeping quarters into a disgusting sight. And for mothers who felt unwell but still had to look after their children the journey became a particularly trying experience. Finally, violent storms, serious accidents and close encounters with icebergs made the trip quite an adventurous or even dangerous experience for some emigrants.

If the journey was generally a far from pleasant experience for emigrants, spells of fair weather, good health conditions and occasions of entertainment on board could make the trip bearable or even pleasurable for some. Indeed, as we have seen, emigrants who did not feel queasy or fell ill found various ways to kill time on board, dancing being a quite popular and frequently mentioned entertainment. In particular, children, who seem to have suffered less intensely from seasickness than adults, often had a pleasant time or even ran wild on board.

Entrance to New York harbour marked the end of the crossing, and thus was undoubtedly a climactic moment for the newcomers. The sighting of the Statue of Liberty also stirred emotions in the heart of emigrants, though by no means in all of them, as we have seen. Lastly, the coda of the trip was a particularly difficult moment of the transition from the Old to the New World (once again, except for the few who had travelled second class) since emigrants needed to confront the authorities' gaze and the medical inspection at ill-famed Ellis Island. The interviews reveal that fear and anxiety were widespread feelings associated to the processing phase at the immigrant depot. Though the informants had often the impression of being treated better than non-English speaking newcomers, the passage through Ellis Island remained a distressful experience, which unsurprisingly left a deep trace in the memory of many immigrants. The testimonies portray – either in broad strokes or in detail – the atmosphere and the admission procedures at Ellis Island. We are told about the noise and confusion in the Great Hall, the segregation of men from women, the way in which people were treated – they were put into “cages”, shoved about like animals – and the encounter with strangely-dressed foreigners speaking incomprehensible idioms, who aroused the curiosity and often the suspicion of British newcomers. Above all, the informants dwell upon the physical examination and interrogation stages, upon doctors requesting them

to strip off their clothes and looking for any kind of disease and defect, and upon “judges” inquiring about their reasons for leaving, job prospects, landing money and a range of other personal matters.

The informants also provide vivid snapshots of their detention period, when there was one. Detention emerges as a remarkably stressful period in the interviewees’ accounts. They felt constricted, disliked the food they ate and the dormitory in which they slept, and were annoyed by the presence of so many strangers around them. Indeed, such close and protracted contact with people of other nationalities sparked intolerant responses on the part of British immigrants. The moment in which emigrants were finally able to reunite with family or friends who had been waiting for them was indeed a happy one for newcomers, all the more so for those who had been detained.

After going through the Ellis Island controls emigrants took a ferry to the mainland. For most, the transitional phase which marked their passage to America was not over yet. Indeed, the difficulties to overcome for those who had not been met by relatives or friends, and thus could not count on their help, were still many. Actually, after the ocean crossing and the processing at Ellis Island, Britons had to tackle the last leg of a long journey, with the few exceptions of those who stayed in New York.

An entire day or a good part of one day usually elapsed from the moment in which emigrants disembarked at Ellis Island to when they set out on the last part of their trip. Eleanor Lenhart, for instance, recalls being ferried to Ellis Island in the morning and catching the train that would take her to her new hometown late in the afternoon; similarly, it was about 7 a.m. when Mary Dunn set foot on Ellis Island and 7 or 8 p.m. when she was finally able to board a train.<sup>161</sup>

In fact, the great majority of the Ellis Island informants used the railways to cover the distance between New York and the place for which they were bound.<sup>162</sup> This is the case with Kyffin Williams, for example, who interestingly also specifies the various stops the train made along the route to his final destination, a town that had traditionally seen a large Welsh inflow: ‘And we came through Pittsburgh, Scranton, Birmingham, Binghamton, into Utica.’<sup>163</sup> Both Cyril Cheeseman and Joseph Delaney left from Penn Station, as they were directed to Pittsburgh and the mines of Wilkes-Barre,

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<sup>161</sup> Eleanor Lenhart, EI, 20; Mary Dunn, EI, 13.

<sup>162</sup> Actually, this is also how emigrants who arrived in America in the last decades of the nineteenth century often travelled. Arthur Palmer’s testimony offers an example from the FWP corpus of interviews. In fact, he recalls that, in the 1880s, his family reached Kansas ‘on an immigrant train’ (Arthur Palmer, FWP, 1).

<sup>163</sup> Kyffin Williams, EI, 38.

Pennsylvania, respectively.<sup>164</sup> Yet many of the newcomers left from Grand Central Station, whose size and hustle tested the emigrants' cleverness and patience. In these circumstances people of one's own nationality could provide welcomed assistance, as in the case of Ronald Reese, who was helped by a fellow countryman to board the right train.<sup>165</sup> Indeed, the final leg of the journey could represent a veritable hurdle for some emigrants, the first of many challenges they would have to meet in their land of adoption. Mrs Sargent and her children, for example, were not collected at Ellis Island, due to the delay in the ship's landing. Thus, she had to find her way to Grand Central Station, catch the right train and, before leaving, send a telegram to her husband in order for her and the children to be met on arrival.<sup>166</sup> In fact, if they had not been met at Ellis Island, newcomers were usually collected at their *final* place of destination. Helen Hansen, her sister and their mother, for example, were waited for at the train station of Gary, Indiana, by the informant's father.<sup>167</sup> Likewise, Dorothy Jones's siblings and their mother took a train to Niagara Falls, where the informant's father was waiting for them.<sup>168</sup> Sometimes emigrants had to change trains when the place for which they were bound was far away. Ellen Pierce and her family got off at Chicago and boarded another train directed to Idaho. When they were close to destination they were met by the informant's uncle, a railway worker, who alighted with them at the station and took them to his home.<sup>169</sup>

Though in most cases the emigrants' trips ended with a train ride, newcomers could have different experiences to the very last step of their journey. Those who arrived in the twentieth century and would live in New York quickly reached their final destination, sometimes using the recently-built subway lines. This is the case with Sidney Pike, who was directed to Brooklyn, the first subway line having being opened a year before his arrival: 'There was one subway running. It was built in 1909. That was the only subway in New York at that time. It ran all the way from Coney Island to the Bronx Zoo on 18<sup>th</sup> Street.'<sup>170</sup> Likewise, Harry Sonnes took a subway train to the Lower

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<sup>164</sup> Cyril Cheeseman, EI, 4; Joseph Delaney, EI, 16. Unlike most other informants, Cheeseman mentions how he and his family reached the railways: one of Cheeseman's aunts worked as a governess for a New York City's attorney, and thus arranged for the informant and his parents to be picked up at Battery Park and chauffeured to Pennsylvania Railroad Station.

<sup>165</sup> Ronald Reese, EI, 34.

<sup>166</sup> Thomas Sargent, EI, 27.

<sup>167</sup> Helen Hansen, EI, 8.

<sup>168</sup> Dorothy Jones, EI, 19.

<sup>169</sup> Ellen Pierce, EI, 33.

<sup>170</sup> Sidney Pike, EI, 16.

East Side, while Kathleen Harlow's family used this new modern means of transport to get to Newark.<sup>171</sup>

A few of the informants reached the relatively nearby towns to which they were directed by using different means of transport. This is the case with Patrick Peak, who went to New Bedford, Connecticut, by boat, and of Agnes Fairchild's family, who also reached Cornwall, in the state of New York, on a boat sailing up the Hudson river.<sup>172</sup>

Lastly, seventeen-year-old Margaret Whittle, who arrived in America in 1925, covered the short distance from the Battery to her sister's house in Elmhurst, NY, by car.<sup>173</sup>

By subway, boat, car or, most often, by train and after many additional hours of tiresome travelling, Britons got to their final destination. While on entering New York's harbour the emigrants' attention was attracted – in addition to the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island – by the grandeur of the city's skyline, and on setting foot on the mainland their sense of wonder and amazement was often strengthened, another “first impact” awaited the newcomers on their journey's end, when they finally saw the town and neighbourhood where they would live. The contrast between these two “first impacts” is worth dwelling upon.

By the first decades of the twentieth century, that is at the time when most of the Ellis Island Oral History Project informants emigrated, New York was already a big bustling modern metropolis characterized by an impressive skyline. This is how Ettie Glazer, who arrived in 1923, describes her first impression of the city: ‘Big. Everything was so big. We saw the tall buildings, we just, all we kept doing was skyscraper looking, like, my God, where's the end of the building, you know, it was so, so tall.’<sup>174</sup> Arnold Ambler, who emigrated in 1920, also recalls his amazement, and a slight feeling of apprehension, in sighting New York:

I thought, oh my God. I says ooh .. I'd never seen .. well, I had seen London, but my God, New York, when I saw those buildings, those tall story, high story buildings. I said good God, what have I come to, you know. Oh, God. Oh, you have a sort of a feeling, you know. Wondering how you were gonna make out.<sup>175</sup>

Once they found themselves surrounded by the city's imposing buildings and immersed in its crowded and noisy streets the emigrants perceived the contrast between

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<sup>171</sup> Harry Sonnes, EI, 13; Kathleen Harlow, EI, 23.

<sup>172</sup> Patrick Peak, EI, 11; Agnes Fairchild, EI, 25.

<sup>173</sup> Margaret Whittle, EI, 43.

<sup>174</sup> Ettie Glaser, EI, 8.

<sup>175</sup> Arnold Ambler, EI, 21.

what they saw and what they were used to – as Robert Reese put it, ‘everything looked so different.’<sup>176</sup> Henry Cohen spent three days in New York before heading for his final destination in Tennessee. He went to Times Square, visited Coney Island and rode the subway. In his eyes America, whose essence was incarnated by New York, appeared to be the embodiment of a new, hectic, forward-looking world, sharply contrasting with the drowsiness of the Old Country – ‘You know, England was much, a different atmosphere entirely.’<sup>177</sup> An exception to the rule is represented by the testimony of Jennie Jacobson. She came from London and apparently, to her, ‘in one way, New York looked a bit like downtown London, you know, busy.’<sup>178</sup> Indeed, the reaction to New York’s appearance of people who came from (or at least had seen) Great Britain’s metropolis or other large British cities was worth investigating in some depth, to see if it differed from the response of other emigrants. In fact, as we have seen above, Arnold Ambler had seen London but was all the same impressed by the New York skyline Yet, unfortunately, the Ellis Island interviewers did not pursue this point.

Some of the informants recall the first impressions they had of their final destination, which usually was not Manhattan, as we have noted. These enable us to view the impact emigrants had with America under a completely different light. In the following two cases, the widespread notion of the United States as a modern, forward-looking country (which has its counterpart in the idea of the Old World as a backward place) is substituted by a portrait of America as a coarse land, a land in which civilization, in contrast with Britain, is unknown. Thomas Cowley arrived at night at the dark and forlorn station of Kenmare, North Dakota, where he had difficulties even in finding someone who would advise him on a place to stay for the night.<sup>179</sup> The case of William Whytock is all the more illuminating. He came from Edinburgh, the beautiful and sophisticated capital of Scotland, and ended up in a small late nineteenth-century Texas town. Indeed, his whole experience after arrival in Texas was dreadful. The immigration agent with whom he and his fellow countrymen were travelling first took them to San Antonio: ‘I had been accustomed to macadamized streets in my native city and those streets in San Antonio were so rough that we held on with both hands. All the vehicles

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<sup>176</sup> Robert Reese, EI, 33.

<sup>177</sup> Henry Cohen, EI, 27. The only FWP interview with British immigrants that touches upon this topic describes New York as tawdry rather than grand. Yet it was the dazzle of the big city that struck the attention of the informant. In fact, to Edward Brown, who arrived in America in 1911, New York appeared to be “cheap”, an impression he explains with the abundance of glaring lights and advertisements in the city (Edward Brown, FWP, 2).

<sup>178</sup> Jennie Jacobson, EI, 10.

<sup>179</sup> Thomas Cowley, EI, 4.

were drawn by mules. The transportation was extremely crude.<sup>180</sup> As work was not available there they looked for it elsewhere. They reached Eden (the irony in the name is even too obvious), where they stopped at a “hotel” for the night:

That hotel was one large room and it was lobby, bedrooms, dining room and kitchen. The kitchen was separated from the other part by a curtain. We were given a quilt or blanket and we picked our places on the floor to put down our bed. [...] I have always been able to sleep anywhere but that hotel almost finished me. Fellows stumbled over me all night, walked in my face and all over me.<sup>181</sup>

After a few days, William Whytock reached San Angelo, the town to which he was directed. There he met a fellow traveller who had got to the town earlier than him and was ready to go back home, since he was ‘disgusted with this wild, uncivilized country.’<sup>182</sup> The informant, though, stayed on because, he points out, ‘I was not much of the roving type’, and eventually found a job in a nearby ranch.

Finally, Arnold Ambler not only offers his first impression of the city of New York, which we have quoted above, but also of his final place of destination. The contrast is startling. Only a few hours after passing through Ellis Island. Ambler reached Springfield, Massachusetts. When he saw the area of the town in which he was going to reside his reaction was quite different from what it had been when he had sighted Manhattan. The uneasy feelings he had at the time clearly re-emerge during the interview:

Then, then we moved up to where they’re living and they were ... don’t get me wrong on this now, we rolled up to where they’re living, and it was all in the Jewish section, entirely in the Jewish section. [...] But there, I said, oh, what a *dump* this is. Boy, oh, Lord. I wonder if I’m getting robbed here.<sup>183</sup>

As the above excerpts from the FWP and Ellis Island testimonies have clearly shown, the reality with which the majority of British immigrants would have to cope in America could be quite different from what they had imagined at home or on landing in New York. Indeed, the next chapter will show that hardship, back-breaking work and tribulations awaited most of the Britons who had left their native country, often far beyond the initial period of their new life.

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<sup>180</sup> William Whytock, FWP, 2.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>183</sup> Arnold Ambler, EI, 20, emphasis added.

## CHAPTER 5

### *Britons in the land of plenty*

We thought we would have no trouble in obtaining employment for my husband. He applied at the employment office with no success week after week. Money was going fast. Salts Textile failed. Finally one day he applied at the employment office of the Bridgeport Brass Company. The only job open was for a stoker. He had to put his pride in his pocket and take this job. He had as working companions three heavy, stalwart negroes.<sup>1</sup>

Enoch used to sing us a song the quarrymen had sung in Scotland when he was young. I don't remember the words. It wasn't the gay, rollicking song you'd expect. It sounded like a hymn. Low, with a monotonous tune. It was about most men needing a God only for their souls, but that a quarryman needed two. One for his soul, and one to guide his hands and feet in the quarries.<sup>2</sup>

They get in machines, and they take away a man's pride in his work and they hire a lot of young green kids to hammer the stuff out [...] and what's the result? Bad workmanship and inferior goods. Can't be any other way.<sup>3</sup>

After my husband died my brother wanted me to come up here. [...] My brother built a house and we lived together for many years. I worked at the Great Northern Hotel when I first came; there I scrubbed floors, washed dishes and made beds. [...] I did laundry work for a good many years. I washed for about thirty-five people at a time – railroad men, clerks, office girls and teachers – and I had the washing from Hogan's restaurant besides.<sup>4</sup>

But then, as I say, we ran into the Depression and things were, were not too easy. And she had to go to work cleaning houses and would get hand outs of clothes for us kids and so on. And things were tough, you know.<sup>5</sup>

My house that we were living before we came to the United States was a much nicer home than what we had when we came to the United States.<sup>6</sup>

We had very hard times. Three years in all. If it hadn't been for WPA road work, there is no telling what would have become of us.<sup>7</sup>

After being admitted into the United States the newcomers entered the third crucial phase of their emigration venture, following the decision-making and preparation of the trip stage and the journey across the Atlantic, with its distressing coda at Ellis Island. Awaiting them was the difficult beginning of a new life, the most important aspect of which was securing a steady and adequate source of income. Just as with other steps of

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<sup>1</sup> Mrs "L.", FWP, 3.

<sup>2</sup> 'Speaking of Credit', FWP, 5-6.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Kerr, FWP, interview n° W15012, 2.

<sup>4</sup> Mrs. Grogan, FWP, 2.

<sup>5</sup> Mary Kendrick, EI, 11.

<sup>6</sup> Mary Williams, EI, 7.

<sup>7</sup> John Crummet, FWP, 5.

the emigration process, job-seeking was not an enterprise most emigrants faced alone. Actually, as we shall see, kinship and friendship networks greatly facilitated their entry into the workplace. The interviews shed light on this and many other aspects of the working experience of British emigrants in America, such as the wages they received, the career they made (or equally did not make), and the working conditions to which they had to adjust. The accounts also provide more than a glimpse of the general economic circumstances in which British emigrants found themselves in the U.S., and of how they fared in periods of hardship, such as the Great Depression.

As was the case with the subjects discussed in the previous chapters, the sources utilized in this work do not always address the same aspects of the British emigrants' experience after landing, and give different weight to the various topics they deal with. While the FWP interviews focus on the immigrants' life in the U.S., the Ellis Island oral histories, as already noted, devote comparatively little space to the emigrants' experience on American soil. Yet information on important subjects such as the immigrants' occupation and economic conditions in America is also sometimes provided in the other sections of the interviews (especially in the part reserved for the pre-emigration phase), as for instance when children talk about their father's emigration, before the rest of the family joined him across the ocean. In short, valuable knowledge can also be gleaned from the Ellis Island accounts on Britons' lodgings, work, money and mobility in the Land of Plenty.

We shall begin with a critical discussion of the pervasive myth of British immigrants' success in America – the term “success” being usually employed in the literature on the topic to indicate the attainment of economic well-being and social mobility. This will provide a useful backdrop against which to assess the evidence offered by the FWP and Ellis Island oral histories. In fact, the analysis of the primary sources conducted in the remainder of the chapter puts to the test the dominant vision of Britons' successful experience in America. As we shall see, both corpora of sources essentially lead to the same conclusions, though the picture offered by the FWP life histories with regard to jobs and mobility is slightly brighter than that revealed by the Ellis Island accounts.



## I. The myth of success

The view of Britons as successful emigrants is widespread in books directed to the general reader as well as in academic works. Wilbur S. Shepperson is the only historian so far to have dwelt upon British emigrants' "failure" in America, in two contributions published about fifty years ago.<sup>8</sup> His studies focus on those emigrants who, for a variety of reasons – political, cultural, ideological, emotional, economic – eventually decided to return because 'they had failed to become part of the new society.'<sup>9</sup> Most of these repatriates – members of all social groups, more often than not belonging to the middle and higher classes – grew *dissatisfied*, *disenchanted* or *disappointed* with the United States, felt *homesick* or could not *adjust* properly. Only a few of them were *economically unsuccessful*,<sup>10</sup> which is instead the more restricted sense in which the term "failure" is employed in this chapter.

This dominant representation is based on the deep-rooted image of British emigration as a movement of "pioneers", knowledgeable and capable men who set the American economy in motion. Indeed, scholars have often emphasized that the development of the American manufacturing sector was greatly aided by the transfer of technology and expertise from Great Britain. This phenomenon intensified in the later decades of the nineteenth century, when it mainly concerned the American expanding *industrial* activities, though it was not limited to these.<sup>11</sup> Thus, throughout the nineteenth century, especially after the Civil War, the remarkable development of the American economy translated into the need for skilled workers which the cradle of the industrial revolution could easily provide. In this context, according to the prevailing interpretation, British

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<sup>8</sup> Wilbur S. Shepperson, *Six Who Returned. America Viewed by British Repatriates* (Reno: The University of Nevada Press, 1961); Id., *Emigration & Disenchantment. Portraits of Englishmen Repatriated from the United States* (Norman: The University of Oklahoma Press, 1965). The former book is focussed on only six returnees, the latter is a fully-fledged work based on 75 cases of repatriation up until 1865 (in particular, see pages 178-196 for a discussion of the diverse causes prompting the emigrants to return).

<sup>9</sup> Shepperson, *Six Who Returned*, 95.

<sup>10</sup> Out of the fifty emigrants for whom 'reasonably complete demographic data is available', Shepperson notes in his more detailed study, only twelve 'actually lost money as a result of their migration,' Shepperson, *Emigration and Disenchantment*, 185, 193.

<sup>11</sup> In fact, along with the knowledge of newer production processes and manufacturing techniques, British workers continued to carry with them a command of more traditional crafts. Miners, quarrymen, and the skilled operatives employed in the silk industry provide clear examples of categories of workers who acted as conduits of skill and technology from Britain to America. Cf. John Rowe, *The Hard-Rock Men. Cornish Immigrants and the North American Mining Frontier* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1974); Richard D. Margrave, *The Emigration of Silk Workers from England to the United States in the Nineteenth Century, with Special Reference to Coventry, Macclesfield, Paterson, New Jersey, and South Manchester, Connecticut* (New York and London: Garland, 1986); Marjory Harper, "Transient Tradesmen: Aberdeen Emigrants and the Development of the American Granite Industry," *Northern Scotland* 9 (1989): 53-75.

workers' skills and command of industrial production techniques ensured most of them high wages and offered many the opportunity to fill supervisory positions or even become entrepreneurs and sometimes make a fortune. Indeed, in the successful British emigrant dominant narrative ordinary, non-mobile or non-skilled workers hardly ever appear.

While the fact that Britons had expertise in their crafts and industrial trades which they transferred overseas and exploited in America is highlighted, the change in the nature of British emigration to America from the late decades of the nineteenth century and the different labour market which they entered does not usually receive sufficient attention. Actually, by the end of the century the character of the British diaspora had transformed. Though it still comprised a considerable percentage of skilled industrial workers and pre-industrial craftsmen (such as miners, quarrymen, tin-platers or artisans in the building trade), especially in comparison with other nations, it was more and more made up of semi-skilled and unskilled operatives.<sup>12</sup> This was less the case with emigrants from Scotland, who usually possessed a higher degree of expertise compared to the English and Welsh, a characteristic dating back to the early nineteenth century, continuing after 1900<sup>13</sup> and becoming even more apparent in the 1920s.<sup>14</sup>

More important yet than the skills emigrants possessed when they arrived was the demand that existed for them in America. The post-World War I decrease in the number of wage earners engaged in ship and boat building in the USA (from 387,446 in 1919 to 50,224 in 1925), for instance, suggests that many of the Scottish emigrants 'entered other occupations within the metal and engineering sector. Those engaged in steelworks

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<sup>12</sup> The main feature of the substantial emigration flow of the late nineteenth century was 'the exodus of some of the least qualified members of the urban labor force in England and Scotland, of the disadvantaged, for whom the continued high rate of population increase and entries to the labour force narrowed the range of opportunities, particularly in a decade when building activity was low.' Charlotte Erickson, *Leaving England. Essays on British Emigration in the Nineteenth Century* (Ithaca-London: Cornell University Press, 1994), 112. According to Erickson, '[o]ne can speak of an "old immigration" from England and Scotland before 1854 of farmers and skilled workers, many of whom hoped to establish themselves on the land or in towns in developing regions. Many of the migrants of the eighties were "new immigrants", like the migrants who were soon to start going to the United States in large numbers from Italy, Hungary, and elsewhere: young unattached males, without industrial skills.' *Ibid.*, 116-17.

<sup>13</sup> Between 1815 and 1914 'as many as half of the Scotsmen who moved to the USA were skilled or semiskilled. Also in the 1920s, 55 per cent of adult men leaving Scotland had skilled trades [...].' Thomas M. Devine, *The Scottish Nation. A History: 1700-2000* (New York, Viking Penguin, 1999), 471.

<sup>14</sup> In fact, in the 1920s a massive wave of industrial, often skilled, workers, displaced from the factories in the Central Belt – the area worst affected by the post-war depression where four-fifths of the Scottish population resided – and from the shipyards of Clydeside reached the United States. Cf. Nicholas Evans, "The Emigration of Skilled Male Workers from Clydeside during the Interwar Period," *International Journal of Maritime History* 18, 1 (2006): 255-56; Marjory Harper and Nicholas J. Evans, "Socio-economic Dislocation and Inter-war Emigration to Canada and the United States: A Scottish Snapshot," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 34, 4 (December 2006): 541.

and rolling mills were the only ones to work in a growing sector [...]. The numbers employed in shipyards declined because, as in Britain, the US industry had endured marked decreases in its workforce after 1919'.<sup>15</sup> As John Bodnar notes, the 'diminution of crafts and skill accelerated after 1900 and had a negative impact upon the older immigrant stocks from northern and western Europe,' and the blurring of skill distinction increased during the era of new immigration as new efficiency production schemes were implemented.<sup>16</sup> Commanding specific skills was a relevant factor in determining group mobility, of course, but so were the stage of economic development which existed when the emigrants arrived and the economic structure of the city in which the emigrants worked.<sup>17</sup>

In sum, after the Civil War, and especially from the 1880s, British emigrants of whatever nationality were less frequently able to employ their expertise and enjoyed fewer opportunities for social advancement compared with the antebellum period. This trend intensified after the turn of the century. Actually, the kind of labour force that an increasingly mechanized American production system required was more and more constituted by industrial semi-skilled and unskilled workers, which explains the massive waves of poor immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe pouring into America during the Great Migration era (1880-1920). Students of British emigration, though, do not often draw attention to this development and the consequences it had for all immigrants, Britons included.

Sometimes the belief of Britons' success – of the success of Englishmen, Scotsmen, or Welshmen, when attention is directed to only one of the British nationalities – is connected to a self-congratulatory attitude, besides being sexist and class-biased in character, since it is normally prominent men who are celebrated. This surfaces in essays brimming with filiopietism, in which the reasons for success are mainly ascribed to the distinctive qualities of a specific ethnic group. Bernard Aspinwall, for example, uses the classic example of Andrew Carnegie's rags-to-riches story only to state that the majority of his compatriots brought significant glory to their nationality in America: 'for most emigrant Scots the improvement was less spectacular but in many instances

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<sup>15</sup> Evans, "The Emigration of Skilled Male Workers," 276-77.

<sup>16</sup> John Bodnar, *The Transplanted. A History of Immigrants in Urban America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 65.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

considerable.<sup>18</sup> This image, however, also predominates in sound academic work. For instance, in the conclusion to his monograph on the Welsh experience in the United States, Professor Edward G. Hartmann states that it ‘would be impossible in a book of this sort to do justice to the success stories or prominent Welsh immigrants.’<sup>19</sup> The motives for their fortune are explained in the previous chapters of the work. In the section dealing with the most significant flow of Welsh emigration in the nineteenth century, for example, Hartmann remarks that

Welsh miners and steel workers formed the specialized personnel that pioneered in the development of both industries in the United States. Many of them advanced to occupy important supervisory positions with the various native American companies then engaged in these activities. In time some of them rose to head these large-scale enterprises. Others among them became entrepreneurs and organized small mining and steel companies in their own right.<sup>20</sup>

The following statement – from the introduction to a well-researched book on Welsh emigration to America between 1860 and 1920 – obviously does not apply in the same way to emigrants arriving after the American Civil War, at the turn of the century and after World War I: ‘Industrialization in Wales had half a century of a head start over that in the United States. Consequently, Welsh expertise in puddling iron, cutting coal or rolling tin-plate was highly prized and in great demand in industrializing America, and it commanded higher wages and privileged positions.’<sup>21</sup> In this case an invalid generalization is made based on the erroneous extension of historically specific circumstances over the whole period under examination. As we have seen, the Britons

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<sup>18</sup> Bernard Aspinwall, “The Scots in the United States,” in *The Scots Abroad*, ed. R.A. Cage (London: Croom Helm, 1985), 98. The following passage, is clear example of ethnic conceit, is worth quoting at length: ‘America represented the realisation of those potentialities denied them at home by privilege in its various guises. The United States was Scotland realised beyond the seas. Accustomed to hard relentless toil on unrewarding land and heavy industrial work at home, Scots came highly motivated with a sense of religious crusade, duty and work ethic: they like Robert Burns were universal men. Disciplined through education, religion, and hardship, they arrived with a well-regulated internal moral mechanism. [...] With these qualities they were well equipped as the shock troops of modernisation. In effect they confirmed Weber’s thesis regarding capitalism and Protestantism. Scots in general accepted that the benign operation of natural law in economics depended on the possession of certain qualities, thrift, the postponement of immediate gratification, industriousness [...]’ Aspinwall, “The Scots in the United States,” 81.

<sup>19</sup> Edward G. Hartmann, *Americans from Wales* (Boston: The Christopher Publishing House, 1967), 163.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>21</sup> William D. Jones, *Wales in America. Scranton and the Welsh 1860-1920* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1993), xix. The following is another example of the emphasis given in Jones’s book to the economic success and career mobility of the Welsh: ‘the coal companies in Scranton also leaned heavily on the Welsh for managerial and supervisory personnel. In fact, Welshmen enjoyed a near monopoly of such positions of power and responsibility. This was a marked feature of the Welsh involvement in the industry from the beginning, and it was the most influential factor which determined Welsh domination.’ *Ibid.*, 31.

who moved to America from the end of the Civil War era to the 1880s had different social characteristics from those who arrived in the post-1900 period and entered quite different labour markets. Yet the literature on this subject seems to suffer from the tendency to misplace emphasis and make sweeping generalizations. As a result, the mass of British immigrants to the United States is made to appear, at all times, as composed of well-paid skilled workers often achieving occupational mobility.

In some cases the conclusions about the reality of the British experience in the United States are based on biased sources. In his recent volume devoted to the emigration of the English, Scots and Welsh in Ohio between 1700 and 1900, William Van Vugt praises the success of British immigrants, who are said to have had talent, industriousness and an “extraordinary character”, all features which along with command of the latest technology and production techniques ensured them high chances of success. Their stories ‘leave the unforgettable impression of mobility, resourcefulness, even restlessness. They moved quickly into fresh opportunities, often combining farming with other occupations. They were an ambitious and dynamic lot.’<sup>22</sup> However, as Van Vugt himself admits, the documents on which his work mainly draws are one-sided. County histories, in fact, were ‘largely the result of the U.S. centennial celebrations and the heightened awareness and appreciation for local history and early settlers and influential people [...]. Therefore, the people who appear in them are not a true representative cross section of society. The poor, the failures, the shy, the unconcerned are not among them [...].’<sup>23</sup> The awareness of the lop-sided character of the sources should have suggested more caution in the assessment of British immigrants’ economic performance in the United States.

The narrative of the economic success of British immigrants is normally repeated uncritically in texts directed to a wider audience, with little or no qualification at all. For example, when discussing the iron and steel industries of Pennsylvania, Elwyn T. Ashton – in a book which emphasizes throughout the remarkable “contributions” of Welsh people to the American civilization in many fields – notes that ‘it was not only the ordinary skilled workers at the furnaces who were Welsh; some of the leaders in the iron and steel industries in Eastern United States were likewise Welsh.’<sup>24</sup> Another example is provided by Kenneth Lines’s contention regarding emigration from Great

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<sup>22</sup> William E. Van Vugt, *British Buckeyes. The English, Scots, and Welsh in Ohio, 1700-1900* (Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 2006), 222.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 225.

<sup>24</sup> Elwyn T. Ashton, *The Welsh in the United States* (Hove, Sussex: Caldera House, 1984), 89.

Britain in the 1920s, a time in which becoming landowners was close to being a chimera in the United States, and starting one's own business was, as ever, the exception rather than the rule (note also the fact that the author conflates United States and British Dominions in his statement): 'Britain's losses through emigration consisted [...] of skilled tradesmen who knew they would be better compensated in America and the British Dominions with the prospect of becoming landowners themselves and proprietors of their own businesses [...].'<sup>25</sup>

Broad historical overviews of emigration to the United States also tend to provide a simplistically positive portrait of the experience of Britons, even more so than research monographs on the subject. This is indeed revealing. In fact, having less space at their disposal, historical overviews aim at conveying what they deem is the core of British emigrants' experience in America. For instance, Maldwyn A. Jones points out that Britons possessed the industrial skills needed in America and thus 'found it easy to gain an economic foothold' there.<sup>26</sup> He also observes that the end-of-nineteenth century mechanization and improved production methods and the arrival of the massive flow of newcomers from eastern and southern Europe translated into displacement but not redundancy for British immigrants. In fact, though he admits that the range of opportunities for Britons narrowed, Jones affirms that 'many Englishmen, Scots and Welshmen moved upward to supervisory and managerial positions' and, more in general, speaks of the 'high standing of the British in American society.'<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, in his 2004 overview of emigration from the British Isles since the sixteenth century Eric Richards observes: 'In the fifty years before the First World War, British emigrants were essentially skilled people leaving one industrial nation for a more prosperous and dynamic one, and they were driven more by aspiration than desperation.'<sup>28</sup> The idea that emerges from these words is that of a profound divide between the British flow and the other waves of emigration (particularly the post-1880 flow of "new immigrants" from southern and eastern Europe), skills and relatively good economic conditions being the crucial differences. Viewing most of the Britons who left as relatively well-off skilled workers is a key element in the construction of an image of them as successful immigrants in the United States. The word "aspiration" as opposed to "desperation"

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<sup>25</sup> Kenneth Lines, *British and Canadian Immigration to the United States Since 1920* (San Francisco: R&E Associates, 1978), 9.

<sup>26</sup> Maldwyn A. Jones, *Destination America* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1976), 111.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 113-14.

<sup>28</sup> Eric Richards, *Britannia's Children. Emigration from England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales since 1600* (London and New York: Hambledon and London, 2004), 212.

seems to allude to an outflow that was not motivated by economic want and impending poverty, which runs counter the evidence we have discussed in Chapter 3. Furthermore, the first part of Richards's statement does not generally apply to the United States, a country which, as already noted, required fewer and fewer skilled workers and offered them more limited opportunities to practise their trade from the end of the nineteenth century onwards.

Finally, in a recently-published overview on immigration, race and colonialism in the United States, Paul Spickard dubiously defines British immigrants as "middle class" (without clarifying the meaning of the term or substantiating his assertions), probably to differentiate them from the new wave of poorer emigrants for eastern and southern Europe. He speaks about '[t]he middle class position of British American migrants' and, with regard to emigration at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, affirms that 'an increasing percentage of British immigrants to the United States in this period were urban members of the middle class before they left the United Kingdom.'<sup>29</sup>

The explicit or implicit contrast with the waves of new immigrants landing on American shores in the Great Migration age undoubtedly plays a role in strengthening the image of Britons as successful emigrants. However, while it is a safe guess to state that Britons achieved a higher degree of social mobility than poor (and non-English speaking) immigrants, the majority of them could *not* achieve supervisory positions, let alone become owners, since there simply were not enough supervisory or managerial positions to be filled by the mass of emigrants that continued to leave Britain for America until the 1920s. Moreover, members of other ethnic groups, especially the second and later generations, were also starting to fill those positions. This happened not least because the mastery of industrial skills, when they were still required, became over time less and less the almost exclusive domain of workers from Britain. Thus, for each British foreman there were obviously scores of British emigrants who could be nothing else but shop floor workers. Indeed, as we have noted above, many Britons performed semiskilled or unskilled work in the United States, more and more so after the new large-scale efficiency methods of production were implemented in most industrial sectors from the end of the nineteenth century onwards.

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<sup>29</sup> Paul Spickard, *Almost All Aliens. Immigration, Race, and Colonialism in American History and Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 178-79.

In conclusion, the argument that British immigrants were, in the nineteenth century as well as in the first decades of the twentieth, well-paid skilled workers generally occupying the higher rungs on the workplace ladder or progressing to become managers and successful entrepreneurs seems to be more of an assumption than the result of thorough analysis, and it is sometimes based on insufficient or biased evidence. Much more extensive and systematic research is needed to check the correspondence of the dominant British immigrant image with reality. Indeed, as we shall see at the end of this chapter, a few scholars have made quite different observations on this subject, and the evidence examined in this work also points in a different direction.

## **II. American jobs**

Though it is patchy, enough evidence can be pieced together from the interviews to partially illuminate key aspects of the working experience of British immigrants to the United States. In particular, the sources enable us to shed some light on the kind of employment Britons obtained after landing, on how often they changed jobs and on whether they were able to engage in the same line of work as in the Old Country. The income the emigrants earned and the mobility, or lack thereof, they experienced also emerge rather clearly from the interviews. By contrast, the FWP and Ellis Island accounts do not usually describe in detail the actual work the informants were doing. For example, we are only told that Thomas Powell's father carried out a low-paid, menial job.<sup>30</sup> Likewise, we only know that Cyril Cheeseman's brothers had hard and dangerous jobs in the Pittsburgh's steel mills,<sup>31</sup> but we are not given any indication as to the specific nature of the tasks they were performing, or even if they were performing skilled or unskilled work.

The large majority of the male immigrants whose oral histories are examined here – most of the FWP informants and virtually all of those interviewed for the Ellis Island project – were employed in industrial activities or in traditional pre-industrial sectors such as building or mining. Some of them had acquired skills in Britain which they were able to exploit in the new country, others were labourers, yet others skilled workers who had to content themselves with semi-skilled or unskilled jobs in America.

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<sup>30</sup> Thomas Powell, EI, 8.

<sup>31</sup> Cyril Cheeseman, EI, 15.



Before proceeding any further, it is worth pointing out that the Ellis Island interviews highlight the crucial function performed by personal networks in helping emigrants to secure their jobs, whilst the FWP life histories do not greatly illuminate this aspect of the emigrants' experience. In fact, after having covered the transatlantic journey, the Ellis Island interviews focus on the initial period of the emigrants' stay in America, when the role played by kith and kin in providing assistance to the newcomers was all the more evident. And indeed it is once again the Ellis Island accounts that show the importance of networks in securing accommodation in the new country, as we shall see below. This might also be explained by the general conditions under which emigration took place in the historical period covered by the Ellis Island interviews. In other words, it was essential for people emigrating towards the end or after the Great Migration era (as was the case with most Ellis Island informants) to secure a job before departure, since they faced an oversupplied labour market on arrival. Having to answer the officials' questions at Ellis Island about their prospects of employment once admitted into the country might also have induced them to find work before leaving.

The fact that in many cases the Ellis Island testimonies show that work was secured before emigration, usually through the agency of kith and kin, is all the more significant, since the fieldworkers did not usually ask a specific question on this aspect of the emigrants' move. Unfortunately, it is not possible to infer from the accounts how often British immigrants tried to make sure the job they would do in America was the same or similar to the one they were carrying out at home. What seems to be fairly clear is that, for some at least, it was *a* job that they were most interested in obtaining once they landed, hoping perhaps to find a better occupation later on. This indeed could be one of the reasons why many emigrants changed jobs, often several of them, at the beginning of their stay abroad. Robert Williams, for example, recalls that his father had been 'promised a job' in the town of Rome, in New York State, though he does not say what kind.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, James Robinson states that his uncle had 'a job ready' for his father in America. He also remembers that this was not to his father's liking, and that he left it as soon as he could.<sup>33</sup> Another example is supplied by fifteen-year old Henry Cohen, who was picked up in New York by his uncle and then taken to Tennessee, where he was put to work in his uncle's store.<sup>34</sup> In the case of Allan Gunn's parents

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<sup>32</sup> Robert Williams, EI, 36.

<sup>33</sup> James Robinson, EI, 20.

<sup>34</sup> Henry Cohen, EI, 30.

what made the scales tilt towards America (rather than Australia, where one of the informant's uncle had gone) was that a former neighbour of theirs praised life in the USA in his letters and told Allan's father 'he had a job lined up' for him<sup>35</sup>. Finally, Ken Johnson's parents had no relatives in the United States. Yet his father, who was a Congregational minister, received a job offer from a church in Fargo, North Dakota, where the informant's whole family readily emigrated.<sup>36</sup>

The testimonies show that a wider network of people of British birth, as well as sometimes of British *descent*, also operated, formed by fellow countrymen or institutions promoting the interests of Britons in America. This spirit of solidarity was felt especially for the members of one's own nationality, not only in the case of the Scots and the Welsh (who are usually considered to have possessed a stronger ethnic consciousness), but of the English as well. For instance, Welshman Kyffin Williams was offered, short after arrival, a job in a "condensery" by a fellow countryman.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, William Whytock, a native of Edinburgh, obtained employment in Texas from a Scotsman who, apparently, felt it was his duty to help people from his own homeland.<sup>38</sup> A sense of national solidarity extending beyond the first generation is revealed by the fact that Newcastle-born Mr "B" was hired at the United Illuminating Company by a foreman of English descent.<sup>39</sup>

Yet a wider sense of belonging to a *British* community certainly existed among emigrants from Great Britain, and was perhaps strengthened in a foreign environment. Sidney Pike, who had emigrated from England at the age of eleven, obtained his first job – dealing with crewmen on board British ships – from the British Board of Trade, and later on was transferred to an office in the British Consulate General.<sup>40</sup> This reveals that British immigrants who had arrived as children and had already spent many years in the United States could still feel a clear sense of belonging to their mother country. Likewise, Welshman Robert Reese was given a job through the intervention of the

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<sup>35</sup> Allan Gunn, EI, 17.

<sup>36</sup> Ken Johnson, EI, 3. Sometimes, it seems clear that emigrants had obtained (or at least been promised) work before leaving, though this is not explicitly stated in the testimonies. Scottish miner Joseph Delaney left for America when he, his mother and stepfather were encouraged to go by two of his stepfather's brothers, who were living in Pennsylvania. Most likely, these were working in Pennsylvania's bituminous and anthracite pits, like many Britons at the time, and meant for Joseph to join them (Joseph Delaney, EI, 6). Similarly, friends and relatives who provided accommodation for emigrants in America presumably often also found a job for newcomers.

<sup>37</sup> Kyffin Williams, EI, 41.

<sup>38</sup> William Whytock, FWP, 2.

<sup>39</sup> Mr "B.", FWP, 2.

<sup>40</sup> Sidney Pike, EI, 18-19.

Scottish wife of a farmer.<sup>41</sup> The foregoing thus shows that, when they could do so, Britons in America helped people of their own “stock”, in particular, though not exclusively, those of their own ethnic group.

Not all of the emigrants were aided to find employment by kith, kin, compatriots or British national institutions. Some had to hunt for a job by themselves. John Hammond, for instance, obtained his first position as a shop assistant by showing up at the largest store in town and asking the proprietor for work.<sup>42</sup> And Harry Norbury, after many days of useless search, approached the owner of a steel plant in Beaver Falls, PA, in the street. He explained the difficult situation in which he found himself, gave the plant owner his credentials (a letter of reference from the factory in which he had worked in England) and asked to be hired, successfully as it turns out.<sup>43</sup> This episode also reveals that British workers brought to America letters of reference or similar documentation from their previous employers, which testified to their expertise in a given occupation and could ease their entry into the American labour market.

## **II.1 Supply and demand**

The initial period of residence in the United States was difficult for the emigrants for a variety of reasons. The need they had to find gainful employment and the impact with the reality of the American job market were certainly critical in this respect.

The Ellis Island testimonies reveal that the newcomers often changed jobs at the beginning of their stay in America. Perhaps this happened because they did not find employment in the same line of work as in Britain or had higher expectations. Another explanation might be that initially they accepted all kinds of jobs to support themselves and their family and only later they started looking for better positions. In this phase they also became acquainted with some of the main differences between the British and the American labour market. Robert Reese, for example, detested his first job in America – he was working on a farm – and left it as soon as possible.<sup>44</sup> His next occupation, helping building truck wheels, was exhausting and earned him a meagre income (he worked 10 hours a day for only 12 dollars a week). Reese eventually found

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<sup>41</sup> Robert Reese, EI, 35.

<sup>42</sup> John Hammond, FWP, 1.

<sup>43</sup> Harry Norbury, EI, 12.

<sup>44</sup> Robert Reese, EI, 34.

a job as a silverware polisher at Oneida Ltd in Sherrill, which he kept for twenty-four years. But this must not have paid very well if, as the informant complains, at the end of his service he was only receiving a pension of 70 dollars a month.<sup>45</sup> Joseph Delaney also changed many jobs at the beginning. He was first hired in a wire rope factory, where he stayed for only 6 months due to the low pay. Then he found employment in a mine, but wore out after three months, because he could not keep up with the work pace of eastern European immigrants, which was quite different from what he was used to in Scotland.<sup>46</sup> Delaney eventually became a driller's helper and, later on, a driller himself.<sup>47</sup> Finally, as we shall see below in more detail, Arnold Ambler changed various jobs after arrival because he did not accept working conditions that were the norm in a overcrowded and competitive job market but to which he was not accustomed.

Though this seem to have been less the case than with the Ellis Island informants, the FWP testimonies also offer some examples of interviewees who carried out different jobs, especially but not exclusively in the first months or years following their arrival. They were probably looking for a place which would meet their economic needs and personal expectations. Thomas Muir, for example, worked in a farm for two years and then in a bank for another couple of years; subsequently, he was hired by an electric light company and, after that, by the Westward Ho Golf Links near Chicago.<sup>48</sup> Similarly, William Whytock first performed a variety of tasks in a ranch, herded sheep and washed dishes in a hotel.<sup>49</sup> Then, using the money he had been able to save, he opened a diner with a partner and finally, after marriage, a general store with his wife.<sup>50</sup> In this case, therefore, the informant's changes of activity eventually resulted in economic improvement and social advancement.

The FWP and Ellis Island interviews sometimes reveal whether in America adult British emigrants were able to continue in the line of work they were doing at home. This is especially significant for skilled workers or self-employed tradesmen (the latter being very few in number in the sources, as we have seen) since in their case being able to carry on their job overseas would give them more chances of earning a good income. Yet, it must be remembered that individual career trajectories were complex and sometimes it is not easy to clearly distinguish the emigrants who continued in their old

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>46</sup> Joseph Delaney, EI, 34.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>48</sup> Thomas Muir, FWP, 2-3.

<sup>49</sup> William Whytock, FWP, 5, 7-8.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 9-10.

jobs from those who did not. For example, the jobs emigrants performed in America might be *similar* rather than identical to those carried out in Britain. Moreover, in some cases they were not able to use their skills throughout their working life in America.

A fairly large number of the informants who were adults at the time of emigration, as well as of the fathers of those who left Britain as children, performed the same or similar jobs in America as at home. However, many did not. Though the evidence is sketchy, it seems that the emigrants who left in the nineteenth century were slightly more often able to perform the kind of job they had been doing in the Old Country than those who left in the 1900s-1920s. Actually, the heyday of Victorian migration corresponded to an unprecedented period of expansion of manufacturing industry in the United States. The remarkable development of the American economy translated into the need for expert workers which the cradle of the industrial revolution could easily supply. This ensured Britons the opportunity to earn high wages by practising their trade in the U.S. and offered some the opportunity to fill supervisory positions or even, much less frequently, set up their own businesses. Indeed, as we have seen above, it is this “Golden Age” of British emigration that is often emphasized by scholars and presented as typical of emigration from Britain to industrial America. Though things had often significantly changed by the 1880s, as we have seen, British workers with skills could still find more opportunities to employ them in the last decades of the nineteenth century than they would after 1900.

In the Ellis Island interviews examples of emigrants who continued in the same or similar line of work in America are provided in the testimonies of Arthur Dickson, Jack Carnegie and Patrick Peak. After doing various kinds of jobs in the initial period of residence in the U.S. Arthur Dickson’s father resumed the drum-making activity he was carrying out in England; Jack Carnegie’s father was able to keep on working as a millwright in America, though not in a jute factory as in Scotland; finally, Patrick Peak’s father, a printer and a tram driver in Scotland, was employed as a printer a few years after emigration.<sup>51</sup> Similar cases are to be found in the FWP life histories. Mr Glasson was an English pitman who obtained employment as a miner in Pennsylvania and Kentucky. He then worked as a peddler for a while and subsequently moved to West Springs, North Carolina, to dig gold.<sup>52</sup> Albert Bailey worked for most of his life as a skilled watch and clock maker, the same trade he had been exercising in England,

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<sup>51</sup> Arthur Dickson, EI, 22; Jack Carnegie, EI, 16; Patrick Peak, EI, 19.

<sup>52</sup> Mrs. Glasson, FWP, 5-9.

mainly for the “Thomas Clock Co.” in Thomaston, Connecticut. Yet at the end of his career (at the time of interview) he was manufacturing bank locks due to a change in the firm’s production strategy.<sup>53</sup> In this case the skills of a craftsman were made redundant over time by the introduction of new technology in the work process. The operations Bailey performed by hand became mechanized and the watch and clock makers suffered consequent deskilling. Not only what in the past had been done by hand was now carried out “by machine”, but the work pace had significantly increased. For an old-time artisan, this obviously affected the quality of the final product. Bailey’s pride in the ability of his category clearly surfaces in his words:

Then you’ve got your machines. [...] Why they just can’t make the same quality clock by machines as they could by hand. Nossir, hand work was far superior. Another angle you’ve got to consider is the speeding up of the workers. They don’t get a chance to put time enough on a job to make sure it’s done right. So the product suffers in the end.<sup>54</sup>

The effects of mechanization, of course, were felt in many sectors. Birnie Bruce points out that the introduction of tools and machines in the stonecutting sheds in Barre, VT, had resulted in unemployment and led to demotion, since work by hand required greater skill on the part of the masons.<sup>55</sup> And Michael Donegal also emphasizes the fact that the workers’ stone carving art had been replaced by technology. Interestingly, he makes a distinction between art and skill, the former having become a thing of the past, the latter “only” referring to the skilful way machines were handled: ‘[t]hey do everything by machines now. It still needs workmen of skill, but not the artists. They are gone, once and for all.’<sup>56</sup>

Some informants had to wait for a while before they could practise the same or similar trade as at home. For example, Archibald Webster’s father, a plumber in England, worked as a draftsman for some time before being able to secure a similar occupation as in his homeland. As he did not find work in shipyards, he switched from ship to domestic plumbing.<sup>57</sup> This shows that emigrants needed to demonstrate flexibility in response to the opportunities available in their land of adoption.

Finally, it seems that emigrants with a certain amount of capital and those who were self-employed (unfortunately, there are too few of these in the interview samples to

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<sup>53</sup> Albert Bailey, FWP, 1-2.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>55</sup> Birnie Bruce, FWP, 4-5.

<sup>56</sup> Michael Donegal, FWP, 5.

<sup>57</sup> Archibald Webster, EI, 11.

make any valid generalization) were frequently able to transplant their activity to America. For example, Sidney Pike, who was running his own bakery in Britain, opened the same kind of business in New York,<sup>58</sup> while “Dad” Rydell, a rather successful English fruit trader in North Carolina, was already a fruit importer in Liverpool.<sup>59</sup> Likewise, Henry Safford, whose family ran a shop in the old country, worked as a retail salesman in the United States.<sup>60</sup> There were exceptions, though. Donald Roberts’s father was a building contractor and his own boss in Wales. Yet, in order to continue in his own activity he resigned himself to working for a large firm in the U.S. He therefore suffered downward social mobility, which was one of the reasons why he became a trade union member.<sup>61</sup>

While some emigrants performed the same or similar jobs as in Britain others were unable to pursue their trade in the U.S. but had to accept what the new country offered them and, as a result, could experience demotion, at least in the early stage of their new life. The sources offer various examples of this, mostly concerning twentieth-century emigrants. For instance, Cyril Cheeseman’s father (who left in the 1910s, before World War I) felt dissatisfied because his work in the Pittsburgh steel mills ‘wasn’t his line’.<sup>62</sup> Similarly, William McGuire’s father (who arrived in the 1920s) was a coal miner in Scotland but became a landscape gardener in the U.S.,<sup>63</sup> while Arnold Ambler, who had been a machinist in an iron factory in England before emigrating in 1920, tried his hand at many jobs and was eventually hired in a company producing sporting goods.<sup>64</sup> Finally, Thomas Powell’s father, who had been a slate quarry miner in Wales, had to content himself with a job as a caretaker for a real estate firm.<sup>65</sup>

The FWP life histories also provide examples of emigrants who were unable to continue in their line of work or use their skills in America. William Whytock, as we have seen above, had learnt his trade in Scotland but none of the various jobs he had in the United States required any skills, and he eventually ended up running a general store. After arrival, he worked in a ranch performing duties for which no previous expertise was required:

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<sup>58</sup> Sidney Pike, EI, 6.

<sup>59</sup> “Dad” Rydell, FWP, 6.

<sup>60</sup> Henry Safford, FWP, fieldworker’s notes.

<sup>61</sup> Donald Roberts, EI, 13.

<sup>62</sup> Cyril Cheeseman, EI, 8.

<sup>63</sup> William McGuire, EI, 13.

<sup>64</sup> Arnold Ambler, EI, 27.

<sup>65</sup> Thomas Powell, EI, 31.

My work consisted of getting the horses up, hauling wood, crawling under the house for eggs, building fires in the early morn, cutting the bacon, grinding the coffee and all the other things an inexperienced person might do. Then, while this was a big cattle ranch, we had to milk, of all things, a goat. It was a wild creature and I had to hold the goat while Mrs. Hill did the milking.<sup>66</sup>

It might also happen that the skills acquired in Britain proved to be a handicap when emigrants searched for a job in America, and that therefore they had to find employment in a different line of work. Workers practising declining crafts or engaged in industrial activities undergoing structural crises in Britain might not be able to employ their skills overseas. This was the case with Arthur Palmer's parents, for example. Indeed, it was very hard for them to find work in the U.S. because 'they had been ribbon weavers in England and that was the only work they knew.'<sup>67</sup>

In sum, British immigrants followed many different employment trajectories in America. In doing so, they had to come to terms with a fluid and competitive labour market, especially after 1900. Consequently, they could suffer demotion and were often unable to continue in the line of work they had been practising in Britain. Furthermore – as the following section will show – they often experienced worse labour conditions and did not significantly improve their economic situation or achieve social mobility.

## **II.2 Work, money and mobility**

The FWP and Ellis Island interviews contain a few interesting references to British emigrants' working conditions in the U.S. These not only shed some light on the risks workers run and the work environment with which they had to cope but, more interestingly, call attention to some key differences between the realities of work in the Old Country and the New World. Incidentally, this shows that much more could have been learnt about the working experience of the informants and their relatives if the fieldworkers had investigated the subject in any depth. Yet the Ellis Island's researchers had other priorities, as has been noted, while the basic nature of the FWP interview outline and the "unsystematic" character of the fieldworkers' interview strategy did not normally translate into a thick description of the informants' working experience.

Part of some workers' lot, for instance, was to be hit by the curse of labour accidents. This topic surfaces once in the Ellis Island testimonies, when Cyril Cheeseman recalls

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<sup>66</sup> William Whytock, FWP, 5.

<sup>67</sup> Arthur Palmer, FWP, fieldworker's notes.



how his father was injured by a white-hot piece of iron in a Pennsylvanian steel mill.<sup>68</sup> As to the FWP interviews, the testimony of Pepe Perez (a quarryman with a Spanish father and a Scottish mother) is quite revealing. The informant considered his quarry to be a good one because no worker had died in it for three years, and took for granted the occurrence of “minor” accidents. Perez’s detailed knowledge of the procedures followed in case of accident and the fact that new measures had been adopted to prevent frequent injuries also show that workers faced risk on a daily basis:

It’s a good quarry. We’ve never had no fatal accident for three years. Of course, minor accidents happen. A crushed foot, or finger. Injuries to the eyes are fewer than ever. A law went into effect about a year ago ordering the wearing of thick goggles by workmen striking steel on stone, or stone on steel. It’s hard to collect insurance on an eye injury if you haven’t adhered to this law. In case of accident, the accident rope is pulled. This rope is always in a handy position in the hole. It blows a whistle. A big metal grout box, used ordinarily to haul away waste granite, is lowered by the derrick. The injured man is put inside and carried to the top. To the office. A doctor is called immediately. While he is on his way, first aid is administered.<sup>69</sup>

The testimonies of the immigrants working in the granite quarrying areas of Vermont highlight the health hazards that some categories of workers were exposed to. The informants mention the harm caused by stone dust, especially in the stone cutting sheds, which workers tried to counteract as they could: it was indeed to “catch” the dust in the quarry where he was employed that the Scottish grandfather of a Barre shop assistant wore a heavy moustache and a beard!<sup>70</sup> The deadly consequences of dust were indeed one of the main reasons behind the 1921-22 quarrymen’s strike in Barre, as Birnie Bruce clearly explained. Though he had been a shed owner and, at the time of interview, was working as a plant manager, Bruce was largely sympathetic to the workers’ demands, probably because he had experienced the work conditions in the shed first-hand and his family had been tragically hit by the effects of stone dust:

The workers [...] wanted more time with their families, and time to do the countless odd jobs their homes necessitated. And they wanted more money, they were no longer content to enjoy the bare necessities of life. But mostly they wanted the elimination of dust. That was always a sore spot. I don’t blame them, I know what I’m talking about. My father, brother, and three uncles all died from stonecutters’ TB.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Cyril Cheeseman, EI, 12.

<sup>69</sup> Pepe Perez, FWP, 7.

<sup>70</sup> “Speaking of credit”, FWP, 5.

<sup>71</sup> Birnie Bruce, FWP, 3-4.

Men in the quarries, Perez noted, 'have to learn to stand sun, rain, snow or wind', and cope with a deafening racket: 'We don't do much talking in the hole. You can't hear with all those pneumatic tools working away at the same time. We talk by signals'.<sup>72</sup> The noise in the stonecutting sheds was also deafening, despite the improvements made in many of them by the end of the 1930s, the outcome of long-drawn-out industrial strife.<sup>73</sup> In fact, the saws ground back and forth incessantly and the drills and hammers were operated continuously. The sound was so loud that, as one informant put it, 'at quitting time, when the noise stops, your head feels funny inside, the ringing stays in your ears, but you get used to it'.<sup>74</sup>

Interestingly, the accounts of two Ellis Island informants reveal that, in the United States, the pace of work was higher and the hours immigrants were expected to work longer compared with Great Britain. As we have seen, in America, British immigrants, especially those who did not possess scarce industrial skills, which was more and more often the case as the twentieth century progressed, had to compete with a large pool of other immigrants in a crowded job market. Moreover, this occurred in a country where the trade unions' bargaining power was much weaker and many of the rights workers had gained in the Old Country had to be fought for anew. As William Van Vugt asserts, perhaps with some excess of rhetorical emphasis, 'though the United States was ahead of Britain in political democracy, Britain was miles ahead in industrial democracy'.<sup>75</sup>

As seen above, Joseph Delaney left his first job in a mine in Pennsylvania because he could not keep up with the work pace of eastern European immigrants, which was quite different from what he was used to in Scotland.<sup>76</sup> Likewise, Arnold Ambler changed many different jobs in his initial period in America because he had expectations that would not be fulfilled in the less regulated and more exploitative American labour market. For example, while Ambler refused to work on Sundays or holidays, other immigrants were willing to do so. The first job he obtained in the United States consisted in loading lumber on trucks twenty-four hours a day seven days a week, and all his workmates were Polish. Little wonder he lost it very soon:

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<sup>72</sup> Pepe Perez, FWP, 6-7.

<sup>73</sup> Dave Bernie considered the shed in which he was employed a suitable working place: 'We got a cement floor instead of dirt. Some of the sheds are pretty cold and dump, but ours is O.K. The thermostat keeps the temperature the same, winter and summer, seventy degrees. The lights are good and it's cleaner than most sheds. It's all right working there. The suction are good. They suck the dust away from the cutting tools, you know' (Dave Bernie, FWP, 2).

<sup>74</sup> Dave Bernie, FWP, 7.

<sup>75</sup> Van Vugt, *British Buckeyes*, 156.

<sup>76</sup> Joseph Delaney, EI, 34.

[...] so I looked for a job, and there was a big place, at ... it's a lumber place [...]. So I went in there and I asked for a job. [...] So they say we'll give you a job, so, unloading trucks, you know, lumber. So I started working. And all the people who were with me were Polish. [...] So they says well, you fellas, you only got three days to load this truck, you know, so he say, you'll have to work tomorrow. I says, I says tomorrow's Sunday. He says so what, you're gonna have to work tomorrow. I said, well, I'm not working tomorrow. Well they say don't work tomorrow don't come in Monday. I didn't work tomorrow, I went in Monday, but I went over yet. (Laughs) I says, well that's my first experience, but I just wasn't gonna work Sunday. I wasn't acclimatised to conditions at that time, it was too quick.<sup>77</sup>

After having been laid off twice Ambler resigned himself to the realities of the American working conditions, did not object to working overtime and on Saturdays and thus was finally able to keep his job in a sporting goods company for a long time.<sup>78</sup>

Based on the documents examined here, it was often far from simple for British newcomers to find a good-paying job in America, despite what is commonly believed. Indeed, at the beginning of their stay they often earned meagre incomes, and many testimonies show that British emigrants' financial difficulties lasted for a long time. As we have seen above, for instance, Robert Reese and Joseph Delaney, who emigrated in 1920 and 1922 respectively, left the jobs they had found after arrival because these did not pay much. After performing various kinds of work Reese ended up spending his life as a silverware polisher and receiving a low pension at retirement. Clearly, it did happen that household heads were not paid satisfactory wages and other sources of income were not sufficient to adequately supplement the family budget. The key word in the following quotation from Ken Johnson's testimony is *never*:

I remember one period of a few months he had a job in Batavia which was about five or six mile away and he walked there and back every morning because he didn't have enough money to ride the bus. [...] They never really got enough money together to go back to England, so they were kind of stuck over here and had to make a go of it.<sup>79</sup>

In some cases things evolved positively for the informants with the passing of time, often a significant amount of time, in others they did not. Thomas Muir and his wife, for example, worked very hard to support their family. He tried his hand at many jobs, in different states, whereas she kept boarders for years. They were eventually rewarded for their sacrifices, but only after toiling for all of their life. In fact, they acquired land in

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<sup>77</sup> Arnold Ambler, EI, 22.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ken Johnson, EI, 10.

Oklahoma in 1902, 27 years after emigrating.<sup>80</sup> Apparently, their standard of living improved once they bought a farm, since they were able to build a ‘very nice house’ on it.<sup>81</sup> Arnold Ambler states that he and his wife were “lucky” because they did not have children for the first five years in America, which reveals they would have found themselves in financial straits if that had not been the case.<sup>82</sup> Life also proved difficult at the beginning for Sam Congram in Oklahoma. As he pithily states: ‘I was hard pressed financially when I came to the new country and worked at everything I could get to do to help sustain myself and family.’<sup>83</sup> In his early days on the farm Congram was compelled to leave his home for long periods and look for work. On one occasion his family ran out of food, and thus his wife had to pluck up enough courage, go to the town shop, explain the situation to the shopkeeper and obtain groceries on credit.<sup>84</sup>

Sometimes precarious or unsatisfactory economic conditions dogged British emigrants through most or even all of their lives. Nine long years had to elapse before John Flint’s father was able to send for his family, for example.<sup>85</sup> John Flint himself must have been quite badly off if he considered returning to England after earning a living as a cowboy for many years, and possibly shows that his father did not succeed as a farmer.<sup>86</sup> Furthermore, at the end of his service Mr “B.” was working long hours for an average pay and still rented the place he lived in, which was located, in his own words, in not ‘too swell a neighbourhood’. The only way to improve his material conditions would have been for his wife to find work, but he preferred her to stay at home.<sup>87</sup>

It could also happen that the emigrants’ income fell in America, especially if they had a well-paid occupation and were enjoying a good standard of living in the Old Country. This was the case with Thomas Cowley:

After I learned the trade and had worked at it for some time I was made mine foreman, which was a very good job. I received about \$1,800 per year for this kind of work and I liked this kind of work. [...] My greatest period of prosperity was before I came to America. I made a lot better money in England than I have ever made here, with the exception when I worked on the railroad.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Thomas Muir, FWP, 3-4.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>82</sup> Arnold Ambler, EI, 26.

<sup>83</sup> Sam Congram, FWP, 1-2.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>85</sup> John Flint, FWP, 1.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 3, 6.

<sup>87</sup> Mr “B.”, FWP, 3.

<sup>88</sup> Thomas Cowley, FWP, 2, 5.

Similarly, there were instances in which regress rather progress (in terms of earnings) occurred in the life of emigrants over time. A period in which they received satisfactory pay might be followed by one in which conditions significantly worsened. This was not only linked to the onset of the Great Depression but could happen at any time. The material conditions of an emigrant's family might be jeopardized by not-so-unpredictable events in the life of a worker such as illness and death. For example, as we have pointed out above, the widow of a Scottish quarryman was compelled to take in lodgers after her husband's demise. The house she and her husband had been able to buy in the past is said, with a euphemism, to '[have] seen better days.'<sup>89</sup>

Retirement and a change of jobs also had an effect on the budget of a worker's family. Mrs Glasson contrasts the economic situation she and her husband were facing at the time of interview with their standard of living just a few years before. In fact, the informant's husband received a comparatively high salary when he worked as a miner: 'As long as Mr Glasson worked in the West Spring mines he never made less than \$80 or a \$100 a month. In those days it didn't take over \$10 a month for the family to live on.'<sup>90</sup> This shows that the material rewards emigrants reaped in a phase of their life might disappear later on. When it came to economic conditions, therefore, emigrants could not take linear progression for granted but faced a possible reversal of fortunes.

Finally, when considering the income of emigrants it needs to be remembered that the workers' pay should be assessed on an annual rather than a weekly basis. Based on their weekly income, some emigrants might be considered better off than they actually were. Dave Birnie, for example, was a polisher at one of Barre's stone sheds, earning \$8.50 a day at the time of interview. Yet, as he points out, he did not work every day of the year as there were seasonal lulls in the business.<sup>91</sup>

Both the FWP and Ellis Island interviews further illuminate the material conditions of British immigrants in America, which helps us to draw safer conclusions on this important subject. The accounts reveal, for instance, the sacrifices immigrants needed to make in order to contribute to the family's budget. In fact, British emigrants of both sexes and all ages needed to work to make ends meet. Sons and daughters who lived under the same roof with their parents did so, often including those who were very young when they arrived in the U.S., and the contribution of wives to the family

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<sup>89</sup> 'A Scotch quarryman's widow', FWP, fieldworker's notes.

<sup>90</sup> Mrs Glasson, FWP, 9.

<sup>91</sup> Dave Birnie, FWP, 1.

economy was crucial, as the next section will show. For example, all the members of Arthur Palmer's family, including children, had to work 'for their board and clothes' when they arrived in the U.S. Life was very hard, much harder than during the Depression according to the informant: 'Mr Palmer thinks these times are great compared to the early days.'<sup>92</sup> The need to cope with financial straits obviously reduced the likelihood that young people obtained further education, which of course also affected their chances of social advancement. This was usually the case with the older siblings. Archibald Webster's brother, for instance, dropped out of junior high school to help balance the family budget.<sup>93</sup>

As we have seen above, many Britons held low-paying, hard or menial jobs at the beginning of their working life, and were frequently unable to improve their conditions significantly over time. Indeed, based on the FWP and Ellis Island testimonies, British emigrants do not seem to have often experience career mobility and social advancement in America.

Social mobility and career progress seem to have been far from common, irrespective of the age at which the informants left their native country. John Flint, for instance, was hired as a horse wrangler when he was eleven years old and then became a cowboy, a social station from which he tried unsuccessfully to raise later in life.<sup>94</sup> Two more examples are provided by Robert Williams, who landed in America as a child but started working as a farmhand and Jack Carnegie, who performed back-breaking work in a foundry despite having emigrated when he was five.<sup>95</sup>

However, though far from directly, social advancement seems to have been linked to age and other family dynamics. People who had left Britain as children, especially when they had older siblings, usually stood more chances to rise socially, to pursue higher education and put this to good use. For instance, Ken Johnson, aged 5 when he emigrated in 1929, became a mechanical engineer. This enabled him to obtain a job in a research institute and, over time, to make a career, work abroad and organize

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<sup>92</sup> Arthur Palmer, FWP, 1.

<sup>93</sup> Archibald Webster, EI, 15.

<sup>94</sup> John Flint, FWP, 3. In the 1880s Flint was driving large herds of cattle from Oklahoma to the northern markets. Interestingly, his testimony sheds some light on the cowboys' life at the time. He recalls being injured in an exchange of gunfire during the night, when Indians were trying to steal some of their cattle, and the trouble cowboys might cause on their way home: "sometimes a cowboy crazed with drink went wild and shot up the town. We placed tin cans on the hitching posts along the street and shot them full of holes regardless of the danger to passersby (John Flint, FWP, 4-5).

<sup>95</sup> Robert Williams, EI, 46; Jack Carnegie, EI, 11.

international robotics conferences.<sup>96</sup> The case of John Daly's siblings clearly shows that age and the sequence in which departures occurred might be relevant factors in the social mobility of an immigrant. Undoubtedly, gender also played a part in this, women being usually discouraged from pursuing further education. In fact, the first of Daly's sisters who moved to the U.S. found work as a cook for a wealthy family, one of his older sisters was hired by a telephone company, most likely as an operator, while one of the informant's youngest brothers went on to become a university professor and the informant himself made a successful career in a corporation, so much so that, after retirement, he had enough capital to enter the real estate business.<sup>97</sup> However, age was not a determinant in social mobility but only a factor among a series of circumstances on which mobility depended. While Jack Carnegie toiled in a foundry, as we have seen above, his older brother obtained an education and a white-collar job as an accountant in New York.<sup>98</sup>

In conclusion, it is undeniable that some of the FWP and Ellis Island informants achieved a satisfactory degree of economic success or made good in America. Apparently, this was more often, though by no means only, the case with people who emigrated in the second half of the nineteenth century than with those who arrived later on. Indeed, the interviews reflect the existence of wider opportunities and a more porous labour market for immigrants before 1900. Furthermore, it seems that in the case of the Ellis Island interviews it was essentially the informants who emigrated as children that sometimes rose socially (confirming that for adult immigrants the opportunities were limited in the first decades of the twentieth century), while the FWP life histories show that also some of the adult emigrants made significant economic progress.

The above-mentioned cases of Ken Johnson and John Daly provide two clear examples of successful child immigrants taken from the Ellis Island interviews. Furthermore, Thomas Sargent, who had left London at the age of eight, pursued a successful career in the Coast Guard and was eventually promoted to the post of Vice Admiral.<sup>99</sup> An instance of a successful adult emigrant offered by the Ellis Island testimonies is provided by Harry Norbury, who arrived in the U.S. 1923 at the age of 21. Though it took him some time to do so, as shown by the fact that 6 years after

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<sup>96</sup> Ken Johnson, EI, 44-45.

<sup>97</sup> John Daly, EI, 12, 28.

<sup>98</sup> Jack Carnegie, EI, 13.

<sup>99</sup> Thomas Sargent, EI, 34.

arrival he could only afford to buy a car from the junkyard, he eventually became a manager and attained a rather high degree of personal wealth.<sup>100</sup>

The FWP life histories provide a few examples of emigrants who held supervisory positions. John Jones, aged 8 when he arrived in 1869, became a tin mills foreman and superintendent in New Castle, Pennsylvania, while William Hughes, also aged 8 when he emigrated in 1853, worked as a “boss” in a Vermont slate quarry.<sup>101</sup> Needless to say, these are cases of comparative and “limited” success. In fact, while receiving higher wages, foremen remained subordinate workers and were far from wealthy.

The FWP accounts also reveal that some emigrants significantly improved their material conditions as well as social status. Economic success might come rather quickly or take a long time to achieve. For instance, Joseph Smith, aged four when he moved in 1854, settled in a homestead and operated a general store at the same time. Business went evidently well if, in his forties, he built ‘several houses for rental purposes in Newport, Washington.’<sup>102</sup> William Platt, a 18-year-old bricklayer in England when he left, in 1873, worked for many years as an estate superintendent in America while running his own brickyard. Towards the end of his career he was able to purchase 5 acres of land.<sup>103</sup> Mr Jackson, a native of Glasgow, lived for 7 years with his in-laws, but eventually bought a general store and moved with his wife into their new house. He became a prominent businessman – he owned a “pleasure boat” at the time of interview – and held civic responsibilities in his town of adoption, Daytona Beach, Florida. As his wife remembers, ‘he was on the school board, a member of the board of city commissioners and was postmaster when he died, in 1917.’<sup>104</sup> The fact that Mrs Jackson was born in 1858, as specified in her interview, and the date of her husband’s death make it possible to infer that Mr Jackson’s successful career in the U.S. mainly developed in the last decades of the nineteenth century.

Personal advancement might not be connected to the economic opportunities America offered but to other social dynamics. While the parents and brothers of Mrs “L.” remained poor and working-class (her brothers were factory workers), for example, she rose socially through marriage. In fact, while working as a hairdresser she met her

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<sup>100</sup> Harry Norbury, EI, 13.

<sup>101</sup> John Jones, FWP, 2; William Hughes, FWP, fieldworker’s notes.

<sup>102</sup> Joseph Smith, FWP, 2.

<sup>103</sup> William Platt, FWP, 8.

<sup>104</sup> Mrs Jackson, FWP, 7, 9.



future husband, a civil engineer. After marriage she went to live with him in a house of their own and, later on, was able to open a beauty shop.<sup>105</sup>

Finally, it is worth noting that, after following an upward career trajectory, an immigrant sometimes experienced downward social mobility. This could happen, for example, in sectors in which the status of workers was threatened by restructuring or the introduction of labour-saving technology. Cyril Cheeseman started as a messenger boy and eventually obtained a lower middle-class job (he became a price clerk). Yet he subsequently suffered demotion owing to the introduction of computers, which performed the tasks he was previously entrusted with.<sup>106</sup> Another example of an upward-downward mobility trajectory, this time on a higher level of the social ladder, is provided by the testimony of Birnie Bruce. In a few years, the informant's father had risen from granite cutter to shed owner, eventually employing 70 men. Birnie successfully continued in the business and also acted as secretary of an important association of granite producers in Barre, Vermont. However, in 1930 he sold his shed to the Rock of Ages Corporation and was employed, as we have already noted above, as a plant manager.<sup>107</sup> Though the testimony does not explain the reason for the sale, it is possible to surmise that the informant's shed could not survive the onset of the Depression and the competition of larger firms. The concentration of the production process in the hands of fewer and stronger companies could thus lay behind Bruce's "downfall" from owner to manager.<sup>108</sup>

### II.3 Toiling women

Immigrant women in America, like working-class women in general, worked for most of their life. After leaving school, girls found employment and continued giving their mothers a hand in the domestic chores, while married women rarely devoted themselves exclusively to housekeeping, a quite demanding task in itself, supplementing the family income in various ways. In other words, unlike men, women

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<sup>105</sup> Mrs "L.", FWP, 6.

<sup>106</sup> Cyril Cheeseman, EI, 14.

<sup>107</sup> Birnie Bruce, FWP, 1.

<sup>108</sup> The development of granite businesses in Barre is outlined in Rod Clarke, *Carved in Stone. A History of the Barre Granite Industry* (Barre, VT: Rock of Ages Corporation, 1989). For the process of incorporation of many firms into Rock of Ages see, in particular, 61-62.

carried on their shoulders what has often been defined as a *double burden* – they worked for money in addition to doing housework.<sup>109</sup>

The job opportunities available to women were those provided by a highly segregated labour market. In fact, just as there was a sexual division of roles within the family, there was also a woman's sphere in the domain of paid employment. Consequently, women looked for and were offered "women's jobs", which were typically unskilled (or classified as such)<sup>110</sup> and low-paying. In this connection, Donna Gabaccia notes that female factory operatives earned from one-half to two thirds of men's wages, while Doris Weatherford, talking about textile mills work at the beginning of the twentieth century, observes that 'the era's standard rule was that the most skilled woman was paid no more than the least skilled man.' Moreover, disparity in different industries notwithstanding, 'in no case did an average man earn less than an average woman.'<sup>111</sup> This applied to both married and women unmarried girls, though the job options for these two categories did not perfectly overlap (it is not necessary to expand on this point here). Thus, women found work as factory operatives, domestics, and in the sales sector (as shop assistants). Besides, they performed other activities typically associated with female service and care roles – they worked as waitresses and private nurses, for instance. Only a few, as we shall see below, had access to white-collar work, and this was the case well into the twentieth century.<sup>112</sup> Furthermore, the paid work wives carried out inside their house was also *women's work*, often an extension of the tasks they already fulfilled for the members of their family. In fact,

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<sup>109</sup> As Donna Gabaccia observes, '[f]or immigrant women past and present, the combination of paid work with heavy domestic responsibilities has been the norm.' Donna Gabaccia, *From the Other Side: Women, Gender, and Immigrant Life in the U.S., 1820-1990* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 46.

<sup>110</sup> In most industries, indeed, workers were separated by gender and women's work was automatically labelled as unskilled, unlike what happened for men. For example, in the garment industry, 'the cutting of cloth was almost always done by men; even though they followed patterns in doing this, it was termed skilled work – while sewing, whether by machine or by hand, was deemed unskilled.' Doris Weatherford, *Foreign and Female. Immigrant Women in America, 1840-1930* (New York: Facts on File, 1995), 226.

<sup>111</sup> Gabaccia, *From the Other Side*, 49; Weatherford, *Foreign and Female*, 208, 225.

<sup>112</sup> On typical female work cf., among others, Maxine Schwartz Seller, ed., *Immigrant Women* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981), 82-83; Alan M. Kraut, *The Huddled Masses: The Immigrant in American Society, 1880-1921* (Arlington Heights, IL: Harlan Davidson, 1982), 84. Leslie Woodcock Tentler's words are worth quoting: 'Women began to enter the nondomestic work force in significant number in the last quarter of the nineteenth century as the progressive mechanization and rationalization of industry created a variety of light, unskilled jobs for low-wage labor. Sophisticated mechanization in industry required myriad assemblers, light-machine tenders, sorters, and packers. Bureaucratization of industry generated increasing – and increasingly routine – clerical employment. The immense productivity of the mature industrial economy necessitated a growing retail sales force. Increased personal wealth accelerated demand for such service industries as professional laundries, restaurants, and beauty salons.' Leslie Woodcock Tentler, *Wage-Earning Women. Industrial Work and Family Life in the United States, 1900-1930* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 14.

cooking and cleaning for lodgers, washing and ironing other people's clothes, mending or sewing garments were all activities women performed routinely for their husband and children and could decide to do for others in exchange for money.

Needless to say, women's working life was quite arduous in Britain too. Phyllis Spinney recalls that her mother, in England, 'scrubbed floors' and 'took in washing to keep us going.'<sup>113</sup> Unfortunately, the interviews virtually ignore this aspect of women's life in their birth country and thus do not clarify if the informants or the informants' mothers worked less hard before emigration or as hard in Britain as they did in the U.S. Admittedly, the literature on the subject suggests that, for women of the aptly called *working-class*, the working pattern was quite similar in the Old Country as in America.<sup>114</sup> Taking into account aspects such as the difficulties of relocation, the necessity of starting a new home abroad, the desire, perhaps, of remitting money to those who had been left behind and the impossibility of relying on as wide a network of relatives and neighbours in America as in Britain, it is possible to speculate that, at least for a few years after emigration, married women often had to work harder in the New World and be thriftier as well. Certainly, what emerges from the interviews, and what is important to point out here, is that the large majority of British emigrant women had a life of toil ahead of them in the United States.

When talking about women's work, even more than in the case of men, it is important to distinguish between different stages of the life cycle, in particular between married women and unmarried girls as we have noted above. Women, in fact, typically tackled different working tasks according to their role within the family.

When the years of schooling were over, usually at fourteen or even earlier,<sup>115</sup> girls usually started to work for wages and did so for about 8-10 years, until they married or had their first child.<sup>116</sup> During this period girls lived with their parents and made an

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<sup>113</sup> Phyllis Spinney, EI, 3.

<sup>114</sup> Normally, girls of the lower classes started to work as soon as they left school, at the age of 14 or earlier, and worked for wages outside the home until they got married as factory operatives, shop assistants, domestics etc. After marriage women contributed to the family budget performing a variety of paid activities within the house, such as taking in laundry or keeping boarders for instance, going back to work for wages outside the home only when it was deemed necessary to keep the family above the poverty line. A by now classic account, based on oral testimonies, of working-class female life in Britain in the period under consideration is Elizabeth Roberts, *A Woman's Place. An Oral History of Working-Class Women 1890-1940* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984). On both married and unmarried women's work see, in particular, 39-68 and 125-148.

<sup>115</sup> Working class youth 'left school as soon as the legal school-leaving age – usually fourteen – was attained, and sometimes before.' Tentler, *Wage-Earning Women*, 93.

<sup>116</sup> Donna Gabaccia observes that immigrant girls started working at the age of ten or twelve in the nineteenth century and usually at fourteen later on. Most of them worked for about ten years, leaving their

important contribution to the family budget. In fact, they were expected to hand over to their parents most, sometimes all, of their wage packet, unlike their brothers, who were allowed to keep more money for themselves.<sup>117</sup>

The FWP and Ellis Island interviews offer many examples of girls' typical paid work activities. Unmarried young women often sought and found employment in factories, as part of the predominantly female workforce in businesses such as the garment trade or industries such as textiles and many others. Indeed, in factories, where they were paid by the piece, 'women wove textiles, made clothing, cut glass and metal, shaped bolts and screws, twisted electrical cables, rolled cigars, and packed soap.'<sup>118</sup> For example, Vera Tanner – who was 20 when she emigrated in 1920 and had been employed in a shop in England – obtained a job in a silk mill in America,<sup>119</sup> while Phyllis Spinney, aged 15 when she arrived (also in 1920), worked in a rubber factory for many years, until she had her first child.<sup>120</sup> Agnes Fairchild was 10 when she arrived from Edinburgh in 1911. After leaving school she was hired in a carpet mill, where her father and sister-in-law also worked. She stayed there for 'quite a long time' and was also employed, but only for about a year, in an ammunition factory during World War II.<sup>121</sup> Incidentally, this case shows quite clearly what was the rule rather than the exception in the job market, for women as well as men, as we have seen, namely the essential role played by family connections in securing employment. Lastly, the daughter of a Sheffield knifemaker was taken on in a knifemaking factory in Connecticut. She recalls that girls did not perform skilled work and their earnings were low, as proved by the fact that they were paid by the month rather than by the week, as was instead the case with men.<sup>122</sup>

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jobs upon marriage. Leslie Woodcock Tentler talks about an "employment interval" of six to eight years, between school-leaving age and marriage. Interestingly, Tentler also points out that, in the early twentieth century, 'a significant and growing minority of working wives [...] were employed in the interval between marriage and the birth of the first child.' Gabaccia, *From the Other Side*, 49; Tentler, *Wage-Earning Women*, 1, 138. In Britain the situation was quite similar. Indeed, 'female labour market participation was concentrated among young single women. In the period before marriage, nearly three quarters of early twentieth-century young women aged 14-24 were in paid work.' Ian Gazeley, "Manual Work and Pay, 1900-1970", in *Work and Pay in Twentieth-Century Britain*, 55-79, edited by Nicholas Crafts, Ian Gazeley and Andrew Newell, eds., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 56.

<sup>117</sup> 'In most working-class families it was customary for an unmarried daughter to surrender all or most of her wage to her mother, and the mother determined what limited amount of pocket money would be returned to the girl.' Tentler, *Wage-Earning Women*, 74.

<sup>118</sup> Seller, *Immigrant Women*, 87.

<sup>119</sup> Vera Tanner, EI, 36.

<sup>120</sup> Phyllis Spinney, EI, 15, 27.

<sup>121</sup> Agnes Fairchild, EI, 30, 32.

<sup>122</sup> Widow Buckingham, FWP, 2.

The testimonies offer various other examples of typically female work positions held by the informants or their relatives. Elizabeth Nimmo for instance, was a shop assistant. She was 16 when she arrived in Nanty Glo, Pennsylvania, and ‘went to work for a Jewish department store owner in this little coal mining town.’<sup>123</sup> Mary Dunn’s aunt was as a telephone operator,<sup>124</sup> while Ettie Glaser, 18 years old when she emigrated from England in 1923, started working as a milliner two weeks after arrival (it was a distant cousin of the informant’s that secured this position for her). Interestingly, Kate Barnham – who arrived in 1929 at 26 years of age and had been a housemaid in an American doctor’s residence in Southampton – worked as a waitress in doctors’ and nurses’ lunch room at Ellis Island. She kept the job for about two years, leaving it after marriage, once she became pregnant.<sup>125</sup>

Several of the informants looked after the children of other people, a quintessentially feminine job, the extension of their role as mothers or future mothers (actually, this was a job older women sometimes also did, as we shall see below). For instance, Margaret Whittle, aged 17 at the time of migration (in 1925), took care of the son of a lady living in the same neighbourhood.<sup>126</sup> This is also the case with Gladys Lambert (aged 14 when she emigrated from England in 1914), who unsurprisingly was also expected to watch over her little brothers and sisters at home. Apparently, she was requested to hand over her pay almost entirely to her parents: ‘Oh, they took it all. Right up until, they might give me a, a shilling or something for a week.’<sup>127</sup>

Child-minding was only one of the duties live-in domestics might be asked to perform. The interviews offer various examples of young British women who were employed in the house of middle class or sometimes quite wealthy families in America. Indeed, the demand for domestics was very strong for most of the period under consideration: ‘[i]n the era between the Civil War and World War I, every aspiringly affluent household had at least one maid [...] the Victorian lady could not keep her social position in the community if she did her own housework.’<sup>128</sup> Since the beginning of the twentieth century and above all after World War I domestic work was in sharp decline, in connection to the increase in the percentage of girls occupied in the

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<sup>123</sup> Elizabeth Nimmo, EI, 12.

<sup>124</sup> Mary Dunn, EI, 6.

<sup>125</sup> Kate Barnham, EI, 8, 15.

<sup>126</sup> Margaret Whittle, EI, 45.

<sup>127</sup> Gladys Lambert, EI, 45, 49.

<sup>128</sup> Weatherford, *Foreign and Female*, 246.

manufacturing sector grew, though it still employed a considerable number of young single women.<sup>129</sup>

It is worth noting that all of the examples of live-in domestics provided by the sources concern adult or young adult women who did not travel with their family.<sup>130</sup> Actually, their job enabled them to solve the problem of lodging and thus save money to send remittances home, if the pay was not too low). British girls who went to school and grew up in America did not opt for this line of work. This may be due in part to its progressive decline in the twentieth century and, above all, to the status stigma they associated with it. As “Americans”, they were perhaps not ready to accept work typically reserved for immigrants (the archetypical image of the Irish housemaid is well-known) and looked for different kinds of employment. In fact, though in 1900 private domestic employment was the single largest occupational category for women, ‘it declined rapidly thereafter as young women’s work and was increasingly the province of women who, because of age or race or martial status, could not easily secure higher-paying jobs in the factory or office.’<sup>131</sup>

There were advantages and disadvantages connected to going into domestic service. Lodgings and board were provided, yet live-in servants worked long hours and were at the beck and call of their employers. In some cases the pay was not particularly good, yet in others it was fair or even high for the standards of the time. This seems to have depended more on the income level of the family for which a domestic worked than on the tasks that she carried out.

On the whole, the informants who held such positions tend to mention the positive sides of this line of employment, though also pointing out some of its drawbacks. Mary Dunn, for example, started working in a store selling hard goods when she arrived from Scotland at 18 years of age. Since she was earning a low wage, the informant began to question the glowing picture of America that her aunt had painted and that had encouraged her to move. In order not to pay for her room and board, Mary decided therefore to go into service. One wonders if the attitude of Mary’s aunt had been suggested by the anticipation of the earnings coming from her niece’s boarding; in any

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<sup>129</sup> On the shift from domestic to manufacturing work cf. Seller, *Immigrant Women*, 87.

<sup>130</sup> Truly, in general ‘[u]nmarried women traveling independently to the United States were more likely to work as domestic servants than their counterparts in family migrations – who preferred industrial work. Donna Gabaccia, “Women of the Mass Migrations: From Minority to Majority, 1820-1930”, 90-111, in *European Migrants. Global and Local Perspectives*, edited by Dirk Hoerder and Leslie Page Moch (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1996), 101.

<sup>131</sup> Tentler, *Wage-Earning Women*, 3.

case, “helping” one’s relatives by providing them with lodging was normally also a way of helping oneself in America. The first job Mary obtained did not pay very well, though – only \$9 a week in 1923, while a 1911 investigation had indicated \$9 per week as the earnings necessary for an adequate standard of living of a single woman in Boston, and a 1915 survey had shown that the cost of living for a single woman in New York varied between \$8 and \$15, with \$10 representing the median estimate.<sup>132</sup> After two years in this position the informant was advised by Scottish friends to go to Youngstown, Ohio, where she could be employed in the house of wealthy people. She actually moved there, where she found a job that paid \$15 a week, which she kept until marriage.<sup>133</sup> As other examples provided above have also shown, in addition to family connections the assistance of fellow countrymen was important for British women (as well as for men) to obtain jobs or crucial information about the conditions of the labour market. Agnes Schilling’s experience was similar to that of Mary Dunn. She started working as a “mother’s helper” (that is how she defines her job), looking after the child of a lady who ran a millinery shop. Yet she left this position due to the unsatisfactory wages. Afterwards, she was hired as a maid in the house of a judge living in Newark, New Jersey, where she remained for two years, until her mother joined her in the United States.<sup>134</sup>

Being in service in a wealthy household meant earning more money and sometimes having a taste of higher society’s life, but it might have its disadvantages. An anonymous Englishwoman worked as a “nurse girl” for an affluent family in New York, looking after a 6-month-old baby. She liked her job and the company of fellow workers, though decidedly not the way she was required to dress: ‘I was all rigged out in a cape of grey and a bonnet [...]. I despised the outfit but liked the work. As was outdoors a great deal, I met other nursemaids daily at the Park . [...] Oh, my day off I went out with other maids. I mean nurse maids. We went to the theatre, always managed to find a dance hall at night.’<sup>135</sup> Margaret Kirk, who arrived at 22 years of age from Scotland, also worked in the house of a wealthy family, as a “nursery governess”. She made as much as \$150 a month, excluding room and board, a very good pay indeed for a domestic in 1923. This job also gave her the opportunity to patronize places usually frequented by the New York monied elite, such as very expensive restaurants, and to

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>133</sup> Mary Dunn, EI, 2-3.

<sup>134</sup> Agnes Schilling, EI, 9, 17.

<sup>135</sup> Anonymous Englishwoman, FWP, 2.

spend the summer in her employers' mansion by the sea. Nonetheless, the informant left this position after a couple of years as the children, she observes, were getting "fresh". She was then hired to perform the same kind of job in a far less affluent household, where she had to share her room with the children she was looking after. She worked there for about a year, until she eventually got married.<sup>136</sup>

Finally, a sense of satisfaction or, on the contrary, of frustration, connected to being in service could derive from the way a domestic was treated by her employers. Typically, Maisie Pedersen, aged 18 when she emigrated from Scotland in 1924, worked as a housemaid (she cooked, cleaned and minded children) until she married. She portrays her experience in quite a positive light. In fact, she felt comfortable and was happy to have her own room and bathroom, though in the attic, which was evidently a significant improvement from her accommodation in the Old Country. Indeed, the informant states she had nothing to complain about her job, also because she worked in the house of a Scottish sea captain and was treated like one of the family.

Some of the informants who arrived in America as children obtained a high school education and were able to secure a white-collar job.<sup>137</sup> This was more and more often the case as the twentieth century progressed – it is not a coincidence, perhaps, that all the examples offered by the sources concern the 1920s.<sup>138</sup> Indeed, it was particularly in this decade that, 'as educational levels rose among the working class youth, many working-class daughters took clerical jobs.'<sup>139</sup> It must be noted, though, that they had normally access to the low-paid routine office work reserved for women, in agreement with the gendered division of the labour market, which also applied to clerical employment. Yet it remains true that office work, even if of the routine kind, represented a step forward in terms of status that could normally be achieved only by some of the members of the so-called "1.5" immigrant generation and, above all, by the immigrant second generation. This, it should be remembered, not only reflected the

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<sup>136</sup> Margaret Kirk, EI, 60-61.

<sup>137</sup> As Maxine Seller remembers, less than ten percent of all American children went through high school at the beginning of the twentieth century. Seller, *To Seek America*, 141. Things had changed significantly at the end of the 1920s. In fact, '27 percent of all seventeen-year-olds graduated from high school in 1929, up from 16 per cent in 1920.' Bruce Levine et. al., *Who Built America? Working People & the Nation's Economy, Politics, Culture & Society*, Vol. Two: *From the Gilded Age to the Present* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1992), 274.

<sup>138</sup> Immigrant daughters, those from the northern European countries first, 'were abandoning factory jobs to work in department stores as sales clerks and in offices as white-collar clericals. Between 1910 and 1920, the number of foreign-born clerks increased by over 200 per cent; the numbers of stenographers and typists by over 100 per cent.' Gabaccia, *From the Other Side*, 52.

<sup>139</sup> Tentler, *Wage-Earning Women*, 3.



progress in education but also the change in the structure of American economy.<sup>140</sup> Ann Nelson, for example, held a position as a secretary for most of her working career, while Margaret Cook worked as a stenographer, receiving \$20 a week, a good pay at the time (the mid-1920s), she says.<sup>141</sup> Jennie Jacobson recalls that her father's wages were not sufficient to cover the costs of higher education and that, therefore, she had to look for a job after leaving school: 'Of course my dad didn't get a lot of money, I'd say we were the average poor person and I went down to work [...].'<sup>142</sup> In fact, by pulling a few strings, her uncle made sure she was employed at a local bank (we are not told what tasks the informant performed there, though).<sup>143</sup> Mary Kendrick also attended high school and then was engaged as a reporter for a local newspaper, contributing her salary to the family budget. Predictably, she left this position when she got married.<sup>144</sup> Finally, after receiving a high school degree Ellen Pierce held a well-paid job as an accountant until she got married, and became a teacher later in life. In fact, Ellen Pierce was the only informant in the whole sample to hold a teaching position (she apparently taught for thirty years).<sup>145</sup> In this connection, it is worth noting that school teaching, even at a primary level, should not be regarded as being on the same footing as typically female white-collar employment, because it conferred higher status and ensured women wider autonomy in the performance of their work.

As we have seen, normally girls left their jobs once they got married, or sometimes after they had their first child. Following the dominant ideology of the time – which normally went unchallenged, by both men and women – a woman's place was in the house, where she could take care of her husband and children and put her qualities to the best use. British female immigrants carried with them a domestic ideal they had internalized in Britain and which they found out was not questioned in America. As Elizabeth Roberts observes, '[t]hose who worked were proud of their skill, their efforts, and their contributions to the family budget. But they rarely had any ambition to go on earning wages all their lives, and regarded it as a matter of social progress and of status to be able to give up wage-earning work. Their emancipation lay, in their estimation, in the move away from work and into the home.'<sup>146</sup> Once married, though, women often

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<sup>140</sup> Seller, *Immigrant Women*, 88-89.

<sup>141</sup> Ann Nelson, EI, 35; Margaret Cook, EI, 54.

<sup>142</sup> Jennie Jacobson, EI, 14.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>144</sup> Mary Kendrick, EI, 37, 39.

<sup>145</sup> Ellen Pierce, EI, 46.

<sup>146</sup> Roberts, *A Woman's Place*, 137.

did not stop generating income. What changed was the form of their contribution to the family economy. Only in few cases do the testimonies show that women could “just” devote themselves to housekeeping, which is likely to have been regarded as a privilege rather than a limitation of their liberty, though the sources do not clarify this point,<sup>147</sup> or that women decided to work outside the house from choice, rather than out of necessity. Doreen Stenzel’s mother, for example, did not work for wages. Actually, it seems that her husband was able to ensure his family quite satisfactory living conditions without the economic help of her wife – indeed, they were eventually able to buy their own house.<sup>148</sup> And Mary Williams’s mother only worked from choice, during World War II, as a way to help with the war effort. Her husband, who was a miner, evidently brought a good wage packet home.<sup>149</sup>

However, the sources analyzed in this work indicate that in America British married women usually took on work they could perform within the home, just like other female immigrants. In fact, ‘[m]arried women of all backgrounds worked at home, combining family with paid labor as boarding-house keepers and sweated workers.’<sup>150</sup> Since often their husbands did not earn a living wage, their contribution was necessary to make ends meet or to earn some extra income which would improve the material conditions of the family. This was particularly important when children were too young to go out to work.

Some women had abilities that could be put to good use in the New World. Robert Williams’s mother, for example, was a milliner, and contributed to the family budget by trimming hats.<sup>151</sup> Mrs Jackson used to make the clothes the members of her family wore, thus saving precious money, as well as garments for other people to buy. She did that by purchasing large amounts of fabrics and putting in many hours of work: ‘I have made almost every garment worn by men, women, or children. We would get dry goods – cotton, gingham, sheeting – by the bolt, making it into clothing and household furnishings. We would get jeans and tailor’s supplies and make coats, vests, and pants

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<sup>147</sup> At the time, few women questioned the predominant domestic ideology, whether in Britain or the United States. Indeed, ‘most working-class women saw confinement to domesticity as a luxury to be sought after rather than an imposition to be shunned.’ Jose Harris, *Private Lives, Public Spirit. Britain 1870-1914* (London: Penguin Books, 1994), 81. Furthermore, since the married woman who worked outside the home usually signalled a state of need, on both sides of the Atlantic ‘the non-employed wife was by the early twentieth century an important and emotionally charged symbol of respectability for many working-class families.’ Tentler, *Wage-Earning Women*, 141.

<sup>148</sup> Doreen Stenzel, EI, 35, 42.

<sup>149</sup> Mary Williams, EI, 41.

<sup>150</sup> Gabaccia, “Women of the Mass Migrations”, 101.

<sup>151</sup> Robert Williams, EI, 47.

for the men and boys.<sup>152</sup> Needless to say, those who did not possess particular skills did not remain idle. William McGuire's mother, for instance, did ironing, sewing, and 'any type of work, to make a dollar.'<sup>153</sup>

Taking in boarders was a strategy women quite commonly adopted to supplement the family's income. Indeed, '[p]erhaps the job that was most common to immigrant women and most likely to be overlooked by statisticians was that of the boardinghouse mistress. Nearly every immigrant had personal experience with the institution of boarding, either as a boarder or as a member of a family taking in boarders.'<sup>154</sup> This was a working activity that enabled women to earn money while at the same time helping kith and kin looking for a cheap place to stay and a familial environment in a foreign land.<sup>155</sup> As has been seen above, Thomas Muir's wife kept boarders for years, and so did Frances Oakley's mother, who also made bread herself, rather than buy it, thus both saving and earning money for the family.<sup>156</sup> Indeed, by wisely managing the family's financial resources and being *producers* of goods – making bread and sewing clothes are two clear examples of this, as we have just seen – women were able to save (that is to say, *earn*) significant amounts of money. Finally, Archibald Webster's mother also decided to take boarders in to cope with the financial difficulties of her family, thus expanding her already heavy workload: 'I remember we had them for quite a while. She must've worked really hard at it. [...] You know that, that with all the kids and, and everything and two boarders in this little house.'<sup>157</sup>

Although married women's contribution to the family budget was made especially in the form of work carried out within the house, sometimes married women engaged in paid work outside the home. They usually did so when it was necessary for the family to count on their wages to survive. Indeed, while the role played by women in the family economy was always important, it became absolutely crucial in times of crisis, namely when their husbands faced unemployment or when accidents, illnesses or disabilities reduced the earnings of the breadwinner.<sup>158</sup> In the face of a dramatic decrease of the family income, women were required to make an additional effort to guarantee the economic survival of the family. This could translate into an intensification of work

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<sup>152</sup> Mrs Jackson, FWP, 11.

<sup>153</sup> William McGuire, EI, 4.

<sup>154</sup> Weatherford, *Foreign and Female*, 221.

<sup>155</sup> Gabaccia, *From the Other Side*, 62.

<sup>156</sup> Frances Oakley, EI, 19.

<sup>157</sup> Archibald Webster, EI, 19.

<sup>158</sup> On the reasons which forced married women to go out to work see Tentler, *Wage-Earning Women*, 140.

within the house (keeping more lodgers or taking in laundry, sewing or other similar kind of work in addition to keeping lodgers, for instance) or the resumption of paid work activities within the house that had been discontinued after children had started earning wages. Most of the time, though, women made the choice of looking for paid work outside the house. In fact, this usually brought in a higher amount of money, while ‘industrial home-work, domestic laundering and sewing, and keeping boarders paid too little to sustain a family at even a minimal level.’<sup>159</sup> For example, even though she had young children, Myrtle Berlinghoff’s mother worked in ‘Bunny’s Babyland’, a store selling articles for babies. The informant does not explain why her mother made this choice, though financial necessity is the most likely reason for this.<sup>160</sup> Similarly, despite having children, Mrs “L.” went to work in a textiles factory in Bridgeport, CT, because her husband had not been able to secure a well-paid job (she had been a textiles operative in England, too). She arranged for an old lady living nearby to take care of her children for the reasonable price of \$3.50 a week, which incidentally also shows how this woman supplemented her income, and engaged in her battle with piecework (the usual form of female factory labour): ‘I started in with my new job. I was slow for about a month then I got up to \$42 per week. I had gotten up my speed as of old. I was an expert in my line. Well, we now felt better in mind and spirit.’<sup>161</sup> Mrs “L.” kept her post until her husband found a good job – unfortunately, we are not told how long she stayed at the mills. What we know is that, a month after having been hired, Mrs “L.”’s husband ‘made [her] retire from [her] position.’<sup>162</sup> This clearly shows, as it were, “in action” the notion that a married woman should not have worked outside the house when it was unnecessary, that her place was the home and her “natural” job housekeeping.

The testimony of Adeline Bundy provides another example of a married woman who had to carry out paid work outside the home. In fact, since her husband’s health was failing, Mrs Bundy accepted all kinds of jobs to earn a living: ‘I was forced to go to work at whatever I could get do – housework, selling door to door, clerking in stores.’<sup>163</sup> This was indeed a difficult period in the informant’s life, and the unpleasant memories connected to it surface several times in her account. Later on in the interview Mrs Bundy expands the list of the jobs she was compelled to perform to balance the

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<sup>159</sup> Tentler, *Wage-Earning Women*, 169.

<sup>160</sup> Myrtle Berlinghoff, EI, 24.

<sup>161</sup> Mrs “L.”, FWP, 4.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>163</sup> Adeline Bundy, FWP, 8-9.

family budget, since her husband was able to do but little work: 'I worked at everything that would bring in a dollar, at everything, at house to house selling, florist shop, grocery store – even picked up apples at Nebraska City.' She also put in long hours in a fruit department and eventually took up practical nursing, which became her main source of income (though by no means the only one – indeed, she continued to take on odd jobs).<sup>164</sup> In particular, during the Depression years Mrs Bundy had to go back to peddling, because other jobs were nearly impossible to find. As a widow (her husband had died in the meanwhile) she also applied for public assistance and received \$6 a month in groceries.<sup>165</sup>

The Great Depression was indeed one of those troubled times that compounded the problems of all working-class (whether immigrant or not) families, and in which women's energies needed to be mobilized more than ever. Indeed, in families that were seeing the spectre of poverty and in a context in which the percentage of working children decreased dramatically, 'women became the primary or secondary breadwinners.'<sup>166</sup> In fact, Mrs Grogan also had to perform menial work during the Depression, as the excerpt from her testimony quoted at the beginning of this chapter shows. She did it 'for a goods many years' while living with her brother (she had been left a widow), who provided her with lodgings, presumably in exchange for housework.<sup>167</sup> Likewise, the 1930s economic crisis pushed Mary Kendrick's mother into looking for work outside the home and devise strategies to continue feeding and clothing her children: 'But then, as I say, we ran into the Depression and things were, were not too easy. And she had to go to work cleaning houses and would get hand outs of clothes for us kids and so on. And things were tough, you know.'<sup>168</sup>

Married women sometimes went back to work outside the home later in life, when their children had grown up and perhaps also gone to live on their own. This choice, therefore, was not usually made out of necessity, but rather in order to earn always-welcome additional cash that would make it possible to save for future needs, live more comfortably in the present or pursue specific economic objectives (such as helping to pay for the higher education of children or the purchase of a house). It was, therefore, a choice that followed an impulse connected to a more ambitious life project rather than a

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<sup>164</sup> Ibid., 16-17.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>166</sup> Melissa R. Klapper, *Small Strangers. The Experience of Immigrant Children in America, 1880-1925* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2007), 171.

<sup>167</sup> Mrs Grogan, FWP, 2.

<sup>168</sup> Mary Kendrick, EI, 11.

mere response to material constraints. For instance, Myrtle Berlinghoff, who had been employed in the statistical department of a company before having her first child, decided to work for wages again when her children were 10 and 13 years old (old enough, apparently, not to need their mother's constant care and supervision). This turned out to be a wise choice, since her husband unfortunately died. In fact, as the informant remarks, 'I wouldn't have known what I would have done if I wasn't working.'<sup>169</sup> Helen Hansen, aged 8 at arrival and a key puncher for a steel company until she got married, went back to work when her children enrolled at university. Regrettably, we are not explained the motives behind the informant's decision (to help pay for her children's tuition?) nor are we told what she did.<sup>170</sup> Finally, as we have seen above, Ellen Pierce became an elementary school teacher when her children grew up. It is interesting to trace her working career, which offers a glimpse of the constraints of women's labour market. As a girl she had been a travelling accountant, but after marriage she was fired because the firm did not want pregnant women to work in their offices (the informant, therefore, suffered a blatant gender discrimination). She then obtained a job in a department store – with a significant decrease in pay compared to her previous employment: she passed from \$90 to \$60 a month in the mid-1920s – which she left when she had her first child. Later on she devoted herself only to housekeeping until, as we have seen, she decided to go back to work when her children became adults.<sup>171</sup>

In conclusion, it is worth remembering that foreign-born women and their daughters 'constituted over half of the American workforce of female wage earners before 1900, and slightly less than half of all female wage-earners in 1920. They worked in large numbers because few immigrant men earned a family wage.'<sup>172</sup> This, apparently, was also true for women coming from Great Britain. The fact that British workers in America also needed the financial contributions of their wives and daughters reveals that their financial situation was often less than satisfactory, and is further proof of the actual realities of life British immigrants confronted in their land of adoption.

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<sup>169</sup> Myrtle Berlinghoff, EI, 33-34.

<sup>170</sup> Helen Hansen., EI, 12-15.

<sup>171</sup> Ellen Pierce, EI, 39-46.

<sup>172</sup> Gabaccia, *From the Other Side*, 46.

### III. American dwellings

Examining the conditions of the houses in which British immigrants lived will give us a deeper understanding of their experience in America, in particular of their standard of living. Together, the two corpora of sources illuminate this aspect of British immigrants' life satisfactorily. In fact, the Ellis Island Oral History Project interview guidelines include questions about the place in which emigrants went to stay once they arrived in the United States. Thus, they outline the appearance of the newcomers' dwellings in the first period of their life in America. By contrast, the FWP life histories describe the emigrants' houses at the time of interview, often in the fieldworkers' notes accompanying the accounts, thus offering a picture of British emigrants' habitations after they had spent considerable time in America. Therefore, in both cases it is houses British emigrants occupied in the twentieth century that are described, which in general were likely to be of a higher standard than those of the 1860-1900 period.

Only a few interviews in both corpora describe, briefly, the neighbourhoods where British newcomers went to live. The accounts that do so reveal that Britons often resided in *immigrant* areas. Arthur Dickson's family, for instance, initially moved into a flat in New York's notorious "Hell's Kitchen", while the Dalys lived in a tenement in New York's Lower East Side, the immigrant neighbourhood par excellence.<sup>173</sup> Arnold Ambler and his wife initially lodged with the informant's sister, whose apartment was located in the Jewish section of Springfield, Massachusetts.<sup>174</sup> Jack Carnegie's family also settled in an immigrant area of Paterson, New Jersey, which they shared with Irish and Italian newcomers, while Mrs "L" resided in an immigrant neighbourhood in Bridgeport, Connecticut, which included many people from England.<sup>175</sup>

The role played by personal networks in securing the emigrants a place to stay in America was crucial, as the Ellis Island testimonies clearly reveal. Individual members of a family – the household heads or the older brothers and sisters who emigrated first – often lodged temporarily with relatives. Then they secured a place in which the remainder of their family would live before they sent for them. Yet, sometimes, when the members of a family reunited in America, they were also put up by relatives at the

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<sup>173</sup> Arthur Dickson, EI, 11-12; John Daly, EI, 20. Jeff Kisseloff has sketched the history of Manhattan's neighbourhoods in the half century after 1890 through the testimonies of mainly ordinary New Yorkers. On the Lower East Side and Hell's Kitchen see *You Must Remember This. An Oral History of Manhattan from the 1890s to World War II* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 4-9 and 547-552.

<sup>174</sup> Arnold Ambler, EI, 20.

<sup>175</sup> Jack Carnegie, EI, 10; Mrs "L.", FWP, 1.

beginning, moving to a home of their own later on. Thus, individual emigrants and occasionally also entire emigrant families (small families of course, made up of the parents and one or two of their young children) relied on personal connections to solve a key issue such as accommodation at the start of their life in the adopted country. Archibald Webster's father, for instance, searched for a house before his family emigrated,<sup>176</sup> while Thomas Powell's family rented their own apartment only after having stayed for a while at the house of the informant's uncle.<sup>177</sup> Some of the emigrants opted for a different strategy or were simply compelled to make a different choice, at least initially. Kyffin Williams, for example, found temporary lodging in a Welsh hotel in Utica as he did not have friends or relatives there. The uncle of a fellow countryman he had met on the ship helped him: "I'm going to take my nephew over here to my home and I'm going to take you to the Welsh hotel, William's hotel on Blandina Street, and there's all the Welsh people there."<sup>178</sup> Similarly, after landing in New York, the family of Donald Roberts spent a few days at the *Cornish Arms* hotel, where apparently all the Britons went.<sup>179</sup> Wider *British* networks (not just English, Scottish or, in the case of the Roberts, Welsh) were thus used sometimes to find accommodation as well as jobs, as we have seen above.

Thomas Sargent's family lived for six months in a boarding house, where they had exclusive use of a kitchen and bedroom but shared the bathroom with other lodgers. Afterwards, they could only afford to move to a one-bedroom apartment,<sup>180</sup> and had to apply their ingenuity to make the best out of a far from comfortable situation:

Dad and Mother bought a convertible sofa that went into a bed, and that's where they slept. And Dad put up a curtain across the bedroom, and so Phyllis slept on one side of that, and I slept on the other in the one bedroom, and then we had a kitchen and a bathroom.<sup>181</sup>

Indeed, the houses British emigrants had to put up with were often poor and cramped, and sometimes located in run-down neighbourhoods. As pointed out above, for example, Arthur Dickson's family lived for a while in the notorious New York neighbourhood called "Hell's Kitchen". Their apartment overlooked the railway tracks, which meant they had to bear the noise made by the freight trains carrying cattle to the

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<sup>176</sup> Archibald Webster, EI, 12.

<sup>177</sup> Thomas Powell, EI, 29.

<sup>178</sup> Kyffin Williams, EI, 40-41.

<sup>179</sup> Donald Roberts, EI, 10.

<sup>180</sup> Thomas Sargent, EI, 27-28.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.



slaughterhouse: ‘[a]nd I remembered that there were a lot of trains around and there was a lot of scruffy kids, you know. We were all, it was poor. We were all in railroad flats.’<sup>182</sup> Only when their financial situation improved did they move to a more pleasant neighbourhood in Brooklyn.

The houses described by the FWP fieldworkers reveal the low standard of living of their occupants. The FWP life histories were collected at the end of a depressed decade, which undoubtedly affected the maintenance of buildings and apartments, particularly their exterior. However, the number of rooms a house had, the pieces of furniture it contained and even its overall external appearance could not have radically changed in only a few years. In other words, the Great Depression could not have transformed wealthy homes into poor dwellings, and what the fieldworkers described were essentially the houses British immigrants occupied in the “roaring” Twenties, only a few years older. Mr and Mrs Crummet, for instance, were renting a three-room house in a terrace, a modest dwelling whose external white coating appeared to be dimmed by time and soot.<sup>183</sup> Mrs Oliver’s farmhouse was also weathered; above all, it was cramped. As the fieldworker puts it, ‘[i]t is rather difficult to imagine a family of eight living in the confines of this not too large house. The kitchen serves as both work room and dining room, with a large stove and table and small sink. It is crowded.’<sup>184</sup>

Some second and later-generation British immigrants also lived for all or most of their life in dilapidated houses. Ed Jackson, for example, was a poor third-generation English tenant farmer who occupied a small run-down house with his wife.<sup>185</sup> And the parents of Mrs “L.” were second-generation English immigrants who rented a house with no bathroom, water-heating facilities or floor covering. The financial situation of the informant’s family improved only when Mrs “L.”’s brothers married and found their own apartments. Only then did the remainder of the family move to a better place and were they able to buy new furniture.<sup>186</sup>

Although many of the informants seem to have lived in poor houses or modest dwellings, it deserves to be noted that the homes of some of them were well-furnished and in generally good condition. Ellen Roberts, for example, lived in a pleasantly

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<sup>182</sup> Arthur Dickson, EI, 12.

<sup>183</sup> Mr and Mrs Crummet, FWP, 1, January interview.

<sup>184</sup> Mrs Oliver, FWP, 1.

<sup>185</sup> Ed Jackson, FWP, 3.

<sup>186</sup> Mrs “L.” (“Other interviews”), FWP, 3-4.

furnished semi-detached house,<sup>187</sup> while William Richard Hughes's house also looked attractive and well-kept: the external white coating was in perfect conditions and several pieces of valuable furniture as well as a radio, undoubtedly a sign of a relatively comfortable standard of living in the 1930s, were to be found inside.<sup>188</sup>

A small number of informants were able to buy a house, though often a (rather) long time after emigration or because they could rely on financial resources from the Old Country. Donald Roberts's father had lived several years in America when the remainder of the family joined him, not before having sold their home in Wales. After arrival they lodged in a hotel for a short period of time while the informant's father looked for a suitable place to buy.<sup>189</sup> Possibly, the Roberts combined the cash deriving from the sale of their house in Wales with the money the informant's father had been able to save in the United States. Indeed, to attain the objectives of financial security and, when possible, home ownership, a combination of virtuous factors was often necessary, which included hard work, a small family, managing money carefully and being able to count on extra earnings. In these cases the role played by women was often crucial. The following passage, taken from the life history of a Scottish quarryman's widow, shows how these objectives could be attained. The informant is talking about her in-laws:

This used to be a rooming and boarding house for quarrymen. My mother-in-law ran it when she came from Scotland. She did well. Her husband worked in the quarries. They worked full time those days, and what with the board-and-room money and being thrifty, and having only one child (that was my husband Johnny) they were able to buy the house for their own.<sup>190</sup>

The foregoing, though, are exceptions rather than the rule. In fact, the FWP testimonies show that the great majority of British emigrants *rented* their houses when they emigrated to America, and often for the rest of their lives. Unfortunately, only rarely do the Ellis Island narratives provide information about home ownership a long time after arrival or at the time of interview. Ken Johnson's parents, for example, purchased a home almost twenty years after they arrived in the USA (in 1929), after the Depression and the War were over, and only with the financial assistance of their

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<sup>187</sup> Ellen Roberts, FWP, fieldworker's notes.

<sup>188</sup> William Hughes, FWP, fieldworker's notes.

<sup>189</sup> Donald Roberts, EI, 11.

<sup>190</sup> "A Scotch quarryman's widow", FWP, 1.

sons.<sup>191</sup> Therefore, they benefited from the post-World War II improvement in economic conditions and the financial aid of second-generation immigrants. The Johnsons' cannot be considered a "success story". Indeed, many years after emigration the informant's parents would have returned to their native country if only they could have afforded it.<sup>192</sup> It is likely, though, that a greater number of the Ellis Island informants – most of whom were interviewed from the 1980s onwards – eventually purchased their houses, considering the general improvement of material conditions and standard of living in the post-World War II era in the United States and Western Europe.

A tentative comparison between the habitations commonly occupied by Britons in America and in their native country is worth making. Actually, in the first part of the interview, the Ellis Island fieldworkers often elicit a description of the houses in which emigrants lived before departing. This makes it possible to glimpse into the conditions of British working-class dwellings in the first decades of the twentieth century, which can be set against the conditions of the houses British emigrants occupied in America in the same period.

There is an ample literature dealing with the poor conditions of working-class housing in Britain in the second half of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth. This shows that the quality of accommodation was generally worse in Scotland than in England, and particularly bad in Glasgow.<sup>193</sup> The evidence provided by the sources does not portray a uniform picture on this subject. On the one hand the testimonies confirm the generally poor quality of housing in Britain. Indeed, the habitations in which the informants or their families lived were usually small, crowded, poorly equipped and without a bathroom. For instance, Mary Kendrick, who lived in a coal mining town in Ayr, Scotland, remembers that her house was tiny, that cooking had to be done on an open fireplace and that the toilets were across the road.<sup>194</sup> Ettie Glaser defines the apartment in the West End of London where she lived as 'awful'. In fact, 'there were no bathrooms, no toilets. You had to go out into the hall. And so many

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<sup>191</sup> Ken Johnson, EI, 20.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>193</sup> On urban working-class housing in Britain in the period under consideration see Martin J. Daunton, *House and Home in the Victorian City. Working-Class Housing 1850-1914* (London: Edward Arnold, 1983); see also the chapter devoted to this subject in John Benson, *The Working Class in Britain, 1850-1939* (London and New York: Longman, 1989), 72-91. A concise and effective description of the condition of urban housing in Scotland after World War I is in Richard J. Finlay, *Modern Scotland: 1914-2000* (London: Profile Books, 2004), 45-48.

<sup>194</sup> Mary Kendrick, EI, 3.

people shared. And as far as I can remember, the rooms were very, very tiny.’<sup>195</sup> Agnes Schilling left the industrial town of Motherwell, Scotland, in 1922, when she was 15 years old. This is how she describes her house: ‘The house was, it was very simple [...]. The kitchen, the beds were in the kitchen and maybe we had a living room. The bathroom was outdoors on the stairway, and my mother, to give us a bath, had to put a big tub in the middle of the kitchen floor and heat the water.’<sup>196</sup> Robert Williams recalls that his family lived in a classic terraced house in Wales, which had two rooms down (the kitchen and the living room) and two bedrooms upstairs, was heated by burning coal and only had a fireplace on which food could be cooked.<sup>197</sup> The home in which Robert Reese’s family lived was also typically heated by coal – ‘and the heat had to be carried upstairs. We were dressed pretty warm, yeah’ – yet it apparently had electricity, in addition to running water.<sup>198</sup> It was also larger than usual, due to the size of the family (there were 10 children). In fact, it had four bedrooms, but beds had also to be placed in the attic, which shows that this house remained a rather crowded place.

Indeed, several testimonies show that, though poor, the informants’ houses in Britain could approach an acceptable quality standard for the time and were better than the dwellings some of the emigrants occupied in America. Thomas Powell, for example, provides a clear and essential description of the terraced houses in which many British workers lived. Admittedly, the place had no private bathroom and was far from large. However, there was space for a parlour, room for flowers at the front, and a back yard complementing the family’s diet:

[...] all the houses were the same. And there was a little bit of a front yard where my mother used to have flowers, and the backyard was much longer. My father used to raise vegetables there. And, of course, there was the usual outhouse at the very far end. And anyways we had two floors and they weren’t big rooms. We had one, like a parlor. Nobody went in there, only if we had company or something. And then we had a couple of bedrooms upstairs and a kitchen [...].<sup>199</sup>

The two-floor terraced house in the small town of Crayford, Kent, where Thomas Sargent’s family lived, was quite typically lit by gas, had indoor plumbing and just cold running water (hot water was obtained by using a “geyser”). Yet it also featured a bathroom upstairs and, in addition to a grassy front and backyard, each family could

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<sup>195</sup> Ettie Glaser, EI, 1.

<sup>196</sup> Agnes Schilling, EI, 25.

<sup>197</sup> Robert Williams, EI, 6-7.

<sup>198</sup> Robert Reese, EI, 9-10.

<sup>199</sup> Thomas Powell, EI, 9.

grow vegetables in a small plot of land up the street. In this case, probably, the less highly urbanized context of a small town enabled the tenants to rent bigger houses and be allotted a larger patch of land.<sup>200</sup> Finally, the description Kathleen Harlow gives of her family's house in Duston (a suburb of Northampton, in the English Midlands) is worth quoting at length, as it gives an overview of the layout of the habitation, the fittings, the conveniences and the general quality of living conditions in the informant's home in 1920 (the year she left for America). It shows that, in the early decades of the twentieth century, at least a section of the British working class could be provided with adequate, recently-built housing ('modern for its time', as the informant says):

Harlow: That was one of the newer houses. They were row houses, as they call them, you know, all attached. And modern for its time, I remember the kitchen, of course, was all stone, stone floors. And then inn back of the kitchen was the, where they had a big copper to do the washing and my mother used to stand with the stick pounding the washing down. And you could go out that door into the backyard, into the garden where we grew vegetables and had chickens and that sort of thing, which was what everybody did. And then the parlor was downstairs, and this other room with the table, I guess it would be like a dining room. And upstairs were the bedrooms.

Levine: And did you have hot running water?

Harlow: I doubt that. I don't think, no, because we had a fire under this copper to make the water hot when they put the clothes in. That's how they had hot water for the washes.

Levine: Did you have like a pump for water? Do you remember ...

Harlow: Yeah, we had a pump. We had a pump in the sink, I think. We were modern. The pump was in the house. We didn't have to have it outside, because ours was a newer house. But it was a pump.

Levine: And did you have an outhouse, or did you have a toilet, or ...

Harlow: We had, it was an outhouse, but it was right close to the back door, so you didn't have to go down the end of then yard. They must have had some type of drainage by that time or something. I don't, that's all I remember.<sup>201</sup>

Summing up, it seems that American dwellings in general did not compare unfavourably with the informants' homes in Britain. Yet the point worth underlining here is that, based on the information drawn from sources, in the United States British emigrants lived in houses whose conditions were often similar and sometimes worse than the conditions of habitations in the Old Country. This provides further evidence of the lack of a remarkable improvement in the standard of living of British immigrants to the United States.

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<sup>200</sup> Thomas Sargent, EI, 6.

<sup>201</sup> Kathleen Harlow, EI, 12-13.

## V. Hard times

Both the FWP and Ellis Island informants lived through the Great Depression period, when life for ordinary people was even more arduous in terms of income, employment prospects and working conditions. The emigrants interviewed by the FWP fieldworkers faced these times of trouble towards the end of their emigration experience or at least a couple of decades after they had landed in America. By contrast, in many cases the economic crisis compounded the difficulties the Ellis Island interviewees were still encountering after only a few years of residence overseas. This subject is discussed more often in the FWP life histories than in the Ellis Island interviews. As we shall see below, the FWP informants are also solicited to express or spontaneously express their opinion on President Roosevelt's government and the New Deal policies, thus talking about the 1930s from a different perspective.

The limited attention paid to the Great Depression in the Ellis Island accounts is noticeable, and surprising given the remarkable impact this had on the life of all Americans, especially of the working classes. Indeed, no question about this period is included in the interview outline. When the issue is discussed at all, it is seldom investigated in any depth. Moreover, it is often the informants that bring the subject up during the conversation. Consider the following exchange: the informant states that she does not remember much about the Depression because she was very young at the time. Yet she was twelve in 1929, when she arrived from Wales, and thus became a young woman in the mid-1930s, when the recession was still biting deeply. More numerous and more probing questions on the part of the fieldworker would have likely elicited further information from the speaker. However, the interviewer soon switches to another topic of discussion:

Levine: Oh, uh-hmm. And do you – you came at the very beginning of the Depression.

Matthews: Right, right.

Levine: Did the Depression affect your family much?

Matthews: In a sense it did. Like, you know, there wasn't as much work or laid off for a little while and things like that. Of course I was young. I still had food on the table. I had clothes on my back, you know. So I didn't really understand it.

Levine: Uh-huh, I see. So – so you probably saw a lot of changes in Cleveland over the years, too.<sup>202</sup>

Another clear example of how the 1930s decade is dealt with in the Ellis Island oral histories is supplied by the testimony of Harry Sonnes. Far from being seen as a

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<sup>202</sup> Marian Matthews, EI, 25.

betrayal of the emigrants' expectations, a period which shattered the dream of America as the promised land, the Great Depression is treated by the fieldworker as just a parenthesis in people's lives: 'and so the Depression went by and somehow the family managed. [...] And you didn't really feel different from I guess most of the people.'<sup>203</sup> The tone of the interviewer's remark is dismissive and fatalistic. Needless to say, it would have been interesting to investigate deeper, to hear the informant's opinion on this rather than the superficial interpretation of the fieldworker.

The neglect of the difficulties encountered by emigrants during the Great Depression period sits well with the comparative lack of attention paid to the post-emigration stage of the informants' experience and the general celebratory spirit of the Ellis Island Oral history Project. In spite of this, several of the informants touch upon the hard times they went through in the 1930s (inevitably, perhaps, since the corpus of Ellis Island oral histories analyzed here is made up of almost 100 interviews). This suggests that more extensive knowledge could have been acquired about the emigrants' life in this period and that much of the informants' memories remained untapped. More in general, a flexible interview approach would have helped the emigrants express what was important *for them* in their American experience. Yet, as we have seen, the Ellis Island fieldworkers conduct highly structured interviews and strictly follow their list of questions, a list of question characterized by some glaring omissions.

The 1930s economic crisis hit city and country, poor as well as wealthier emigrants. Thomas Muir's parents, for instance, were forced to sell the farm they had bought originally to clear the one they had purchased afterwards and on which they lived.<sup>204</sup> Unemployment, of course, was the main scourge of the decade. Archibald Webster recalls that his father was off work half of the time, and his family had to depend on credit to get by:

I mean, things were tough. I can remember when I was, what, in sixth, seventh, sixth grade, fifth and sixth grade. Used to go to the grocery store and put on things on the tick, you know? And God, if it wouldn't have been for that grocer, half the people in that neighborhood would have starved to death.<sup>205</sup>

Ken Johnson's parents earned a poor income during the Depression – '[t]hey were only making about fifteen dollars a week between them for a number of years'<sup>206</sup> – but

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<sup>203</sup> Harry Sonnes, EI, 21.

<sup>204</sup> Thomas Muir, FWP, 6.

<sup>205</sup> Archibald Webster, EI, 22.

refused to go on relief to preserve their self-esteem. Other informants, even though they did not like it, were compelled to accept public assistance. William McGuire's father, for example, was hired to work in one of the Works Progress Administration's schemes.<sup>207</sup> A temporary solution to unemployment, therefore, was in many cases found through government help, although people had often to cope by themselves for quite a while. For instance, John Crummet, a Scottish emigrant to Ohio, found work through the WPA after three years of unemployment (he had been dismissed from a paper mill due to the relocation of the factory to Virginia).<sup>208</sup>

Work conditions could also get worse due to the economic crisis. Mr "B." suffered a de facto demotion in this period, as he could no longer rely on an assistant engineer to perform his duties in the employ of a building superintendent. At 65 years of age, he complained, he had become a Jack-of-all-trades, who worked as an engineer as well as a 'cleaning man' and 'elevator boy' without receiving an adequate pay.<sup>209</sup>

In some cases, the onset of the Depression put the fulfilment of the emigrants' objectives at risk. Donald Roberts's parents, for example, faced foreclosure since they were no longer able to pay their mortgage instalments. In order to avoid the shame of depending on government assistance they first turned to relatives for a loan. Yet, eventually, the informant's father had no other possibility but working for one of the relief schemes started by the Works Progress Administration, which involved digging drainage ditches.<sup>210</sup> The Depression affected the emotional as well as the material conditions of people. Talking about his father, Donald Roberts articulates quite effectively the psychological burden jobless people had to carry during the 1930s:

he would go to New York and walk up and down the streets looking for some evidence of some work going on in the building, like cement or whatever. Try to walk in to get a little job. He'd walk the streets systematically. One street after the other, day after day after day and come home, *nothing, nothing, nothing*. So that is a tremendous weight to put on somebody, you know.<sup>211</sup>

It is also worth remembering that, as we have seen above, in order to counteract the effects of financial difficulties in troubled times, such as was the case during the Great Depression, housewives often had to increase their already heavy workload, working for

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<sup>206</sup> Ken Johnson, EI, 4.

<sup>207</sup> William McGuire, EI, 23.

<sup>208</sup> John Crummet, FWP, 1, 3, 16 March interview.

<sup>209</sup> Mr "B.", FWP, 3.

<sup>210</sup> Donald Roberts, EI, 14.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*, 15, emphasis added.



wages outside the home and accepting all kind of employment to bring in some money. In this connection Ken Johnson recalls that, for his mother, life in America turned out to be more arduous than it had been in the Old Country, as she ‘had to do a lot of hard physical work which she had not been used to doing in England’ (and this was probably not an isolated example).<sup>212</sup>

Moreover, the Depression decade saw many emigrants return to their birth countries due to their inability to overcome the difficulties they were encountering. Actually, the Ellis Island body of interviews with British immigrants includes the testimonies of a few returnees. In some cases – though certainly not in all of them, as we shall see in the next chapter – the reasons for going back were clearly of an economic nature. John Sewell’s parents, for instance, decided to go back to Scotland in 1931, when the informant was three (he had been born in New Jersey in 1928). Apparently, his father opted to return home due to the onset of the Great Depression, though unfortunately the issue is not discussed at any length in the interview: ‘Levine: “So I guess your father saw the handwriting on the wall as far as the Depression coming” Sewell: “Yeah. They, they saw that I think.”’<sup>213</sup> Along with the homesickness of the informant’s mother, the bite of the economic recession also seems to have lain behind the decision of Dorothy Warner’s parents to head back to England in 1935.<sup>214</sup> Finally, in her testimony Marie Gardiner recalls that some of her relatives (namely one of her aunts, one of her uncles and her grandmother on her mother’s side) emigrated to the United States in 1930 but went back the following year because of the critical economic situation of the country.<sup>215</sup>

Finally, it is worth remembering that the economic depression hit hard not only first-generation emigrants but also British-Americans, including those who held supervisory positions but whose economic well-being depended on the possibility of keeping their job. This was the case with Joe Hippert, a second-generation English traffic manager at an iron furnace in Virginia. At the time of the interview, after one year of

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<sup>212</sup> Ken Johnson, EI, 19.

<sup>213</sup> John Sewell, EI, 29.

<sup>214</sup> Dorothy Warner, EI, 27.

<sup>215</sup> Marie Gardiner, EI, 2. Marie and her parents also returned to Scotland in 1938, but their move appears to have been mainly prompted by personal reasons. In fact, Marie’s mother took ill and had a hysterectomy. As she thought she might not survive, she decided to entrust the rearing of her children to her sister in Scotland. Admittedly, while she was ill Marie’s father did not prove to be able to manage the family shop competently, and thus ‘things got really bad’ (Ibid., 2-3). Perhaps, therefore, economic issues compounded the problems of the informant’s family and contributed to their decision to head back, yet return in this case does not seem to be a direct consequence of the Depression.

unemployment, he sadly acknowledged: 'I cannot go much longer this way. I have a family.'<sup>216</sup>

In addition to discussing the economic difficulties of the decade, the FWP informants were sometimes asked for, or spontaneously voiced, their opinion on the New Deal and President Franklyn Delano Roosevelt's political strategy. Generally, they viewed the government's efforts positively and held the President in high esteem. William Platt, for example, approved of Roosevelt's policies in favour of the 'forgotten man' and the 'underdog',<sup>217</sup> while George Wray asserted that the Works Progress Administration prevented 'many deserving people from being unemployed.'<sup>218</sup> Similarly, "Mr 'B.'" hoped President Roosevelt's would be re-elected and believed he would keep America out of the war.<sup>219</sup> Some of the informants focussed on the advantages they and the place where they lived could gain from the New Deal. Edward Brown, for example, considered the government's aid to be useful both for business in North Dakota and for the people, who were not allowed to sink into poverty.<sup>220</sup>

Occasionally, the interviewees pointed out what they believed to be the flaws of the relief system introduced by the Roosevelt administration. Robert Smalley, for example, acknowledged the importance of the WPA. Yet he also remarked that some people received assistance though they were only too lazy to work, while others were not given enough to support their families with dignity. Moreover, according to Smalley, a large quantity of financial resources were being wasted to pay the officials supervising the programmes.<sup>221</sup> Alex Russell considered relief necessary, but he thought it was 'abused in many ways'. According to him, programmes should have been run by county and township boards, which would have been able to better address the needs of each individual. Besides, Russell favoured a "self-help approach" and emphasized the fact that, though badly in need of assistance, he had managed to get along without resorting to public aid. Help should have been given to the aged and people with health problems, i.e. those who could not help themselves.<sup>222</sup>

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<sup>216</sup> Joe Hippert, FWP, 5.

<sup>217</sup> William Platt, FWP, 9.

<sup>218</sup> George Wray, FWP, 3.

<sup>219</sup> Mr "B.", FWP, Jan. 1940 interview.

<sup>220</sup> Edward Brown, FWP, 2.

<sup>221</sup> Robert Smalley, FWP, 4.

<sup>222</sup> Alex Russell, FWP, 2.

The generally favourable view of Roosevelt's administration emerging from the FWP testimonies may partly be explained by the fact that some of the informants or of their relatives directly benefited from the New Deal policies, as we have seen. Furthermore, the emigrants were aware of being interviewed by WPA workers, people they often knew personally. This, perhaps, predisposed them to voice a more positive opinion of the government's activity than they would have expressed under different circumstances. This point should not be overemphasized, though. In fact, the Roosevelt administration was largely supported by Americans in this period, particularly by the lower classes.<sup>223</sup> And, as we have noted, several informants did not shy away from openly expressing their reservations about the New Deal.

## V. They had a dream

The FWP and Ellis Island oral histories show that some of the informants and of their relatives were economically successful in America. However, according to the evidence provided in the testimonies, the majority of British emigrants were poorly rewarded for their efforts and the distressing move to a foreign country. In this connection it is worth noting that no significant differences emerge between the various British nationalities with regard to the pattern of social mobility and degree of material success.

The dream of independence that many cherished rarely materialized, and financial security was often an illusion, or took an entire life of sacrifice to be attained. Moreover, in general British emigrants experienced little social advancement or career mobility in

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<sup>223</sup> The Roosevelt administration suffered a decline in political consensus in the second half of the Thirties – in particular, the swing to the Republicans in the 1938 elections was significant. This translated into the downsizing or disposing of the President's programmes by a less sympathetic Congress. For a concise and informative account of the waning of the New Deal see Walter Lafeber, Richard Polenberg and Nancy Woloch, *The American Century. A History of the United States since the 1890s* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1988), 218-21. However, Roosevelt obtained once again a large majority of the popular vote in the 1940 presidential elections (27.2 million votes to Wendell Willkie's 22.3) and had always the majority of ordinary Americans behind him. What T.H. Watkins observes with regard to the 1936 elections remained essentially true for the rest of the decade and beyond: 'Roosevelt may have lost forever those few capitalist leaders who had reluctantly supported him in 1932 and 1933; he may have lost the embittered Democrats and Progressives who had gathered under the flag of the Liberty League; he may have lost much of the middle class; and he certainly lost those fringes whose prejudices and passions Father Charles Coughlin was so busily exploiting. But everything else was his – the millions of still unemployed, immigrants and the sons and daughters of immigrants, blacks who rejected "Lincoln's Party" and voted Democratic for the first time in their lives [...], millions of others who lived in a world of hunger and whose hopes were fixed on the figure of a man whom they believed in absolutely. Most of them were working men and women, and Roosevelt had them whether they were unionized or not.' T.H. Watkins, *The Hungry Years. A Narrative History of the Great Depression in America* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1999), 319.

the first generation; actually, some could suffer demotion, especially in the twentieth century. The uneven information offered by the sources does not allow us to safely compare the experience of labourers with that of emigrants who arrived in America “with a skill”. What the testimonies indicate is that the situation of the labour market at arrival was more important than the skills emigrants carried with them. Indeed – unlike the literature on the subject reviewed at the beginning of this chapter, which portrays the experience of British emigrants to America in the period under consideration as virtually homogeneous – the interviews examined here show that, after 1900 more often than before, British immigrants held unskilled jobs and/or received low pay, and they had to fight off the intense competition of other immigrants in what had become a crowded job market in most sectors of the economy.

Furthermore, the initial period (sometimes a very long one) of most of the interviewees’ life in America proved to be very difficult, and even later in life they had to work long hours often at a fast pace for a living wage. Few of the immigrants attained home ownership, while most occupied modest dwellings, not only at the beginning of their stay overseas but also at the end of their life. In short, for many of the first-generation British immigrants whose testimonies have been collected by the FWP and Ellis Island fieldworkers the dream of achieving wealth and property, or even a satisfactory standard of living, in America remained a mirage, as opposed to the harsh reality of unremitting toil.<sup>224</sup> Finally, if for many Britons emigration to the United States turned out to be a harsh experience, for some it was a complete failure. William Whytock left Scotland with a group of friends. After many years he finally settled down and attained an acceptable standard of living. By contrast, for all of his fellow travellers America turned into a veritable nightmare: ‘[o]f the other boys who came with me, I am the only one left in this country. Two went back soon after they got here, two drank themselves to death, one who went to California did not live many years.’<sup>225</sup> It should also be remembered that, in the period under examination, the Great Depression compounded the difficulties of all immigrants, though its effects were obviously not felt

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<sup>224</sup> Of course, the Ellis Island informants who left as children and lived most of their life in America after World War II must have benefited from the general increase in real wages and the possibility of accessing an expanding consumer-goods market. Yet one needs to remember that this was also the case in Britain, once the post-war lean years were over and certainly as from the early 1960s or even before – since when Conservative Prime Minister Harold Macmillan pronounced his famous ‘you’ve never had it so good’ phrase in 1957. This means that, if they had stayed at home, these informants would have probably enjoyed similar standards of living as in America for most of their lives. In other words, their “success” should be measured in comparative terms.

<sup>225</sup> William Whytock, FWP, 10.

only in the United States. Indeed, as we have seen, the sources offer a quick glimpse into the decision of a few informants to go back for financial reasons during the 1930s. Leaving aside the effects of the Great Depression, it is easy to predict that a study focusing on return migration would likely identify the “failure stories” of many British immigrants to America.

A life of work, often of toil, awaited British immigrant women in America in the period under consideration. Life was especially hard for mothers, who were responsible for feeding and dressing their husbands and children as well as for running the house according to common standards of respectability on a usually tight budget. They were also expected to earn additional money to help meet the family’s needs, and on their shoulders often fell the responsibility of ensuring the family’s survival in times of crises. Women’s contribution, as we have seen, could take the form of paid work outside the home or of paid work carried out within the domestic walls. Women of all ages usually worked long hours for little money, and when they worked outside their house they were often employed in unskilled dead-end jobs. Promotion, social mobility and a “living wage” were normally unknown to them.

The conclusions reached from the analysis of the FWP and Ellis Island interviews strengthen the argument made in a few scholarly works which have highlighted the limited career advancement and social mobility of British emigrants in the U.S. and questioned the claim that Britons enjoyed a significantly higher standard of living in America compared with the Old Country in the second half of the nineteenth century and first decades of the twentieth.

In an essay included in a volume covering the period of mass migrations from Europe to America (*circa* 1840-1914), Dirk Hoerder observes that the “evidence” for higher standards of living in the United States is largely ‘an assumption on the part of contemporaries and historians that it must have been higher since otherwise neither men nor women would have migrated.’<sup>226</sup> Likewise, John Bodnar remarks that, while some of European emigrants to the United States achieved success, ‘generally continual toil in the strata they entered upon arrival in industrial America was the fate of most newcomers if they remained. [...] Sons who could expect a lifetime of toil in the industrial economy were more likely to repeat the occupational patterns of their fathers.’

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<sup>226</sup> Dirk Hoerder, “From Migrants to Ethnics: Acculturation in a Societal Framework,” in *European Migrants. Global and Local Perspectives*, ed. Dirk Hoerder and Leslie Page Moch (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1996, 211-62), 232.

Besides, with regard to second generation *British-Americans*, Bodnar noted that, in a sample of men born in Boston between 1860 and 1879 (when the “new” immigrants were yet to arrive), as many as 55 per cent of the sons of fathers employed in blue-collar work remained in manual jobs.<sup>227</sup>

Haertmut Kaelbe’s and Peter R. Shergold’s contributions also point in a different direction from the conventional wisdom depicting America as emigrants’ land of plenty (the latter’s research is concentrated on immigrants from Great Britain). Kaelbe drew on more than 30 studies to compare urban social mobility in the U.S. with urban mobility in many industrializing European countries. First of all, he remarked that no clear American pattern of intergenerational mobility emerged from the available literature: ‘[t]here is no indication from the dozen studies of mobility rates between social classes that the proportion of inhabitants who left the social class of their fathers was larger in America than in Europe.’<sup>228</sup> Admittedly, Kaelbe notes, in the United States workers had higher chances of achieving career mobility, i.e. mobility within one’s life cycle. This was particularly the case with those who were unskilled. Yet career mobility was far from high on both sides of the Atlantic: in America a little more than 10 per cent of the workers entered the lower middle class within one decade, while in Europe the percentage was ten per cent or less. In short, in Europe as well as in America the large majority of workers remained in their social class. Besides, due to the remarkable variety in the data concerning the American cities, it was impossible to identify a consistent American pattern of career mobility. Also, apparently skilled workers moved up into the lower middle class more often in the European continent than in the United States.<sup>229</sup> Finally, it should not be forgotten that Kaelbe focussed on the *nineteenth* century, a historical period in which opportunities for social mobility were more abundant in the United States than after 1900: the frontier was open and land available, manufacturing activities expanded in an unprecedented way, especially in the second half of the century, and emigrants entered a labour market which badly needed foreign workforce. By contrast, in the twentieth century the frontier was mostly closed and the labour market more and more crowded and competitive. The adoption of restrictive measures on immigration after World War I clearly reveals that, by that time, the picture

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<sup>227</sup> Bodnar, *The Transplanted*, 173.

<sup>228</sup> Hartmut, Kaelbe, “Social mobility in America and Europe: A Comparison of Nineteenth-Century Cities,” *Urban History Yearbook* (1981): 24-38, 25. Kaelbe also noted that, due to the considerable variations in mobility among European and American towns, it was doubtful that an intergenerational pattern of social ascent could really be identified. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.*, 29-31.

had radically changed compared with the past. This makes Kaelbe's observations on the essential similarity of social mobility in urban Europe and America in the nineteenth century all the more significant.

Peter Shergold's objective was to test the "historiographical truism" that early twentieth-century Americans enjoyed a better standard of living than their British counterparts.<sup>230</sup> In order to do so, he calculated comparable standards of living in Birmingham and Pittsburgh based on cost of living, hourly wages and the "basket of goods" workers bought in Britain and America. Since the relative cost of living in Pittsburgh was 65.3-67.1% greater than in Birmingham, and the relative hourly money wage in Pittsburgh for an engineering laborer was 71.7% higher, Shergold pointed out, in America 'the relative real hourly wage of the engineering laborer was [...] only 2.8-3.9% greater' than in Britain.<sup>231</sup> Moreover, there was a marked difference between the situation of skilled and unskilled workers. In fact, Birmingham's unskilled workers were in general better off compared to their Pittsburgh equivalents.<sup>232</sup> Shergold's main conclusions are that

assertions of relative American affluence must be severely qualified. Unskilled workers experienced similar levels of material welfare in Britain and the United States in the 1900s, and it is quite possible that English laborers actually enjoyed a higher standard of living during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The dominant characteristic of the American labor force was not comparative income superiority, but the much greater inequality of wage distribution. The most highly paid manual employees, primarily skilled workers, earned substantially larger incomes than those in equivalent English occupations, whereas low-paid workers received incomes similar to those in England.<sup>233</sup>

Besides, in many other respects life for the Birmingham worker was easier than that of his American counterpart. In fact, he 'generally had longer leisure time, enjoying (as did few Pittsburgh workers) a half-day on Saturday; he was less likely to be killed or maimed while at the workplace; and he labored under less pressure. He was almost certainly provided with superior social services and facilities – hospital accommodation, city-based unemployment benefits [...].'<sup>234</sup>

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<sup>230</sup> Peter R. Shergold, "'Reefs of Roast Beef': The American Worker's Standard of Living in Comparative Perspective," in *American Labor and Immigration History, 1877-1920s: Recent European Research*, edited by Dirk Hoerder (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983): 79.

<sup>231</sup> Shergold, "'Reefs of Roast Beef,'" 91.

<sup>232</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>233</sup> Peter R. Shergold, *Working-Class Life. The "American Standard" in Comparative Perspective, 1899-1913* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1982), 224-25.

<sup>234</sup> *Ibid.*, 230.

In conclusion, the evidence discussed in the previous pages casts considerable doubt on the dominant image of most Britons as economically successful immigrants in America and calls for careful reconsideration of this complex issue. The sources utilized in this work make a strong case for a more nuanced interpretation of the lived experience of first-generation British immigrants to the United States and point to a resemblance between the Britons' experience and that of immigrants of other nationalities. Actually, differences between the life and work experiences of British immigrants and post-1880 newcomers to the United States should not hide the essential similarities between all groups of immigrants.



## CHAPTER 6

### *Culture, identity & belonging*

Before all lands in east or west  
I love my native land the best  
I honor every nation's name  
Respect their fortune and their fame  
But I love the land that bore me  
Before all tongues in east or west  
I love my countrymen's the best.<sup>1</sup>

We have been happy enough here, Mary and I. We still talk and think of Scotland, people do not forget the homeland. But now, it is too far, too late to go back. And we might be like strangers there, and it would hurt to feel so in your own land.<sup>2</sup>

I never thought she was terribly happy here. She missed her sisters over there. She was kind of a shy person who, she didn't take well to American ways. I, I have often wondered if she were a little resentful of having to come here.<sup>3</sup>

I think my father would have gone back in, in retirement years. I, I think he kind of wanted to die in Scotland.<sup>4</sup>

I missed my family very much. And many a time I wanted to go back, but I says, "No, I'm not going back. I'll stick it out." And I did.<sup>5</sup>

Yes I would change my life quite a bit if I had the chance to live it over. First I would have remained in England and not let my uncle talk me into staying here in this country. However, I am sure had I come to this country when I was a younger man, I am sure I would have liked it a lot better. But now that I am here and am an American I am doing the best I can.<sup>6</sup>

[...] when World War II came out and they said all people that were not naturalized would have to, uh, inform the immigration soci, uh, authorities to become, either to become an American citizen or you have probability of being sent back to wherever you came from. So I went to school, I went to, uh, took the test and became an American citizen.<sup>7</sup>

There was more things that you could get if you were a citizen than you could if you weren't.<sup>8</sup>

[...] we belonged to a Scottish clan and they had meetings about every two weeks or something. They used to have the dances and the bagpipes and do the Scottish dancing and stuff like that. We used to like to go.<sup>9</sup>

People travel from many places to compete in them. People from Pennsylvania, where there are many Welshmen, come to local Eisteddfods, and Poultney people go down there. Every year there are choruses that go from this country ever to Wales for the National Eisteddfod. In Granville, N.Y., they have more competitors than here. I have often attended the Eisteddfods there.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mrs W. R. Larson, FWP, 3.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Donegal, FWP, 5-6.

<sup>3</sup> Mary Kendrick, EI, 11.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>5</sup> Maisie Pedersen, EI, 50.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Cowley, FWP, 6.

<sup>7</sup> Ettie Glaser, EI, 27.

<sup>8</sup> Dorothy Jones, EI, 33.

<sup>9</sup> Helen Hansen, EI, 10.

<sup>10</sup> Mrs Roland Whittington, FWP, 3.

Sigrist: Did you meet your husband in the States?

Whittle: No. I actually married the lad from next door, you know, he was an English boy. His, his elder sister married my eldest brother.<sup>11</sup>

Sometimes you'd hear of some Welshman going over to Wales and back with a wife, you know.<sup>12</sup>

Lowest goddamn, swinish, low-livin' people on earth them Sheffield knifemakers. Suckin' booze and beer day in and day out, the men and the women too. Know what they used to call Sheffield? The sink-hole of England, that's what Sheffield was. My own daughter married Frank Platts. His father was one of 'em and Frank he had that no good lazy streak on him too. She went to work teach n' school and kept him for five years.<sup>13</sup>

I had an awful school life in this country, because anyone that comes over here a foreigner with a foreign brogue, especially a Scotch brogue, he gets picked on every time he turns around. I think I got into more fights over here that I ever did with the kids over there in the old country.<sup>14</sup>

Levine: Did you actually go to school at all while you were in England?

Harlow: No, I was too young. I started here. That's where my English accent went. I went to school in Brooklyn, and they used to laugh at me, so they volunteered to teach me to "tawk" right.<sup>15</sup>

[...] you know, you just assimilate and you – you copy the other children. I didn't want to be different. And so, of course you want to dress like your friends and you talk like your friends.<sup>16</sup>

Anyway, this was a strange country, strange people, strange ways.<sup>17</sup>

Emigrants *change* in their country of adoption, to a greater or lesser degree, by modifying their habits, attitudes, values and priorities. They negotiate a new identity and adjust to a different reality, adopt new ways and have experiences that are peculiar to the host land. In this connection, the quotation from Michael Donegal's interview reproduced above is illuminating. Michael and his wife had not forgotten their birth country, but realized they would feel like strangers in Scotland if they went back, since both themselves and the Scotland they had left had transformed in the meanwhile.

At the same time, emigrants usually retain essential facets and practices of their native culture – once again, to a greater or lesser degree, depending on a variety of personal and social factors. Indeed, the preservation and renegotiation of fundamental elements of one's native culture and identity are crucial aspects of the experience of

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<sup>11</sup> Margaret Whittle, EI, 50.

<sup>12</sup> Peggy Roberts, EI, 27.

<sup>13</sup> Charles Kerr, interview n° W15014, FWP, 2. Although it is classified under his name, this interview is not with Charles Kerr. In fact, the fieldworker did not find Kerr at home, but met along the way an anonymous old gentleman who had worked in a knife factory for a some years, and thus had a brief conversation with him on the subject of knifemaking.

<sup>14</sup> Patrick Peak, EI, 13.

<sup>15</sup> Kathleen Harlow, EI, 9.

<sup>16</sup> Sheila Koch, EI, 29.

<sup>17</sup> Frances Oakley, EI, 17.

individuals who leave their home to start a new life in another land, and Britons are no exception.

British newcomers to the United States – but this is also the case with other countries characterized by a predominant Anglo-Saxon culture, such as Australia, as we shall see at the end of this chapter – have often been defined as “invisible” immigrants. Such a definition is essentially based on two factors. First of all, it draws on Britons’ supposed economic success and social mobility, notions which we have already discussed in the previous chapter. Along with economic success, the other main pillar on which the idea of British immigrants’ invisibility rests is the assumed cultural similarity between Britons and Americans. In fact, Britons are presumed to have blended into American society rather quickly and effortlessly because of their cultural proximity to native-born citizens. Some difference is acknowledged between the English on the one hand and the Scots and the Welsh on the other, especially as regards the creation, strength and duration of ethnic institutions. In other words, the Scots and the Welsh are said to have had a higher degree of *ethnicity* in the sense of groupness, of “institutional completeness”, following Raymond Breton’s classic definition of the term. However, this relative “institutional visibility” of the Scots and the Welsh does not affect substantially scholars’ overall notion of British immigrants’ invisibility.<sup>18</sup>

Based on the evidence supplied by the FWP and Ellis Island oral histories, we shall put this assumption to the test and advocate a more nuanced interpretation of the issues of identity and belonging of British immigrants in the United States. In particular, this chapter will focus on the subjects of Britons’ national self-identification, sense of belonging and adaptation to life in America, as well as on the question of naturalization and the miseries of homesickness. Furthermore, it will deal with British immigrants’ retention of cultural markers (such as a distinctive accent, leisure habits, the celebration of traditional holidays and the eating of Old Country’s typical foods) and the prejudice they encountered in the United States. All of this will enable us to draw some important

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<sup>18</sup> Breton points out that many ethnic communities develop a formal structure ‘and contain organizations of various sorts; religious, educational, political, recreational, national, and even professional. Some have organized welfare and mutual aid societies. Some operate their own radio station or publish their own newspapers and periodicals. The community may also sustain a number of commercial and service organizations. Finally, it may have its own churches and sometimes its own schools. [...] much variation can be observed in the amount and complexity of community organizations; the degree of institutional completeness in fact shows variations from one ethnic group to another.’ Raymond Breton, “Institutional Completeness of Ethnic Communities and the Personal Relations of Immigrants”, *American Journal of Sociology* 70, 2 (1964), 194.

conclusions on the degree of cultural integration of British immigrants into American society in the period under consideration.

### I. “Invisible” immigrants

Exceptions to the dominant narrative of British immigrants’ “invisibility” are rare. In the two works he devoted to British repatriation from America in the nineteenth century, Wilbur Shepperson observes that lack of adaptation was one of the main reasons causing emigrants from Britain to return home. In the first of these volumes he notes that the ‘popular belief that assimilation was easy and rapid for emigrants who possessed a speech and culture akin to that of Americans requires careful analysis.’<sup>19</sup> In his later book, Shepperson fully explains the reasons why, in his view, these returned home. He claims that the forces prompting Britons to recross the Atlantic were quite different from those that led other ethnic groups to do so. Actually, Britons found immigration ‘a less disruptive ordeal than other Europeans,’ but at the same time were ‘better equipped to understand and judge America, make sharp comparisons, and indulge in enlightened criticism.’<sup>20</sup> Britons’ pride in their own heritage together with, paradoxical though it may seem, their cultural closeness to Americans, heightened their expectations and made them less willing to adjust:

Acceptance of the new cultural patterns was often slow and sometimes led to repatriation. Perhaps ethnocentric and national connections were more binding on Britons than on migrants from Continental countries. Great Britain was an international power which elicited respect or fear throughout the world. Her economic and political influence in North America was a matter of constant concern to the United States. [...] Knowledge of the language allowed for the rapid assimilation of English immigrants, but at the same time it permitted them to compare critically American authors, newspapers, and theaters with those at home. Acquaintance with English governmental and legal traditions provided an easy understanding of American law, but it sometimes provoked censure of political methods and frontier justice. [...] British workers once associated with trade union or Chartist movements found American labor groups lacking in organization, leadership, and purpose. For the first century of American independence, few immigrants other than the British were in a position to evaluate and criticize most broad and basic aspects of American society. Some concluded that Anglo-Saxon institutions were weakened and corrupted when transplanted and that the original rather than a blurred carbon copy could provide the most fruitful life.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Wilbur S. Shepperson, *Six Who Returned. America Viewed by British Repatriates* (Reno: The University of Nevada Press, 1961), 57.

<sup>20</sup> Wilbur S. Shepperson, *Emigration & Disenchantment. Portraits of Englishmen Repatriated from the United States* (Norman: The University of Oklahoma Press, 1965), 7. Not all of the seventy-five emigrants whose return Shepperson discusses in this volume were English, despite the title of the book.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 183-84.

Cultural affinity and lack of adaptation appear to be the two sides of the same coin in Shepperson's argument. This, therefore, does not really question the idea of a fundamental cultural similarity between Britons and Americans, on which the claim of British immigrants' invisibility heavily rests.

By contrast, particularly in her well-known collection of English and Scottish immigrants' nineteenth-century correspondence, Charlotte Erickson genuinely casts doubt on the conventional wisdom that Britons adapted quickly and easily in America. Actually, she observes, the letters 'suggest that English and Scots immigrants in the United States often, at least for a long time, accommodated to their new environment rather than assimilated.'<sup>22</sup> She also remarks that many English and Scottish newcomers 'experienced difficulties in adapting to American society' and that those who had left Britain as adults 'rarely forgot that they were immigrants.' Finally, Erickson points out that many letter-writers were deeply homesick and 'commented on the differences between Britain and America and their feelings of being strangers in a strange land.'<sup>23</sup> It must be noted, though, that with regard to the English Erickson seems to support a fundamentally different thesis in her important collection of essays on British emigration to the U.S., as will see below. Finally, in his recent study of emigrants' correspondence, David Gerber also appears to cast doubt on the simplistic vision of Britons' unproblematic adaptation in the U.S. Indeed, he talks about 'distance and a degree of tension' in the relationships between Americans and British immigrants, pointing out that 'in general British immigrants had many criticism of the Americans,' though these varied from one individual to another.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, 'in private relations the immigrant generation often preferred one another's company', because they trusted their own people and judged Americans 'too self-interested to be trustworthy'. Such evaluations of American character, Gerber notes, 'certainly mock commonsense notions of the ease with which cultural similarities may have led the British to interact effortlessly with Americans.'<sup>25</sup>

Interestingly, historians noticed the difficulties British immigrants (or at least some of them) had in blending into American life when they focussed on return migration or carefully examined the immigrants' lived experience. The former implied exploring the

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<sup>22</sup> Charlotte Erickson, *Invisible immigrants. The Adaptation of English and Scottish Immigrants in Nineteenth-Century America* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1972), 5.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>24</sup> David A. Gerber, *Authors of Their Lives: The Personal Correspondence of British Immigrants to North America in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 23-25.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 26-27.

reasons returnees had for going back, which included lack of adaptation to the new country, the latter illuminated the immigrants' actual feelings in their land of adoption. Given the paucity of detailed studies of the lived experience of British immigrants to the United States as well as of works on British return migration, despite the numerical significance of the phenomenon, it is reasonable to surmise that more evidence will be found of Britons' rather difficult adaptation in America when these fields of research are more adequately developed. Indeed, this chapter bears out this claim.

The mantra of British immigrants' "invisibility" is repeated in academic works specifically devoted to the experience of Britons in America as well as in general overviews on immigration to the United States.

For instance, in an insightful volume devoted to the identity construction and "homemaking myths" of immigrants to the United States, Orm Øverland affirms that "[a]ll immigrant groups other than the British have in their time been looked at askance as "foreigners.""<sup>26</sup> William Van Vugt, in a book concerned with immigration from Britain in the middle of the nineteenth century, remarks that Britons 'could assimilate more readily than other immigrant groups thanks to the language and essential cultural traits and traditions they held in common with most native-born white Americans. They were "invisible immigrants" in the sense that they could blend in readily with other Americans and engage more immediately in social and civic affairs.'<sup>27</sup> This occurred because Britons entered a society with which they were already familiar, 'by virtue of its deep roots in British culture and the long, almost continuous, flow of British people to America that had started early in the seventeenth century.'<sup>28</sup> Admittedly, in a later work dealing with British immigrants to Ohio, Van Vugt concedes that 'not all escaped pangs of doubts, acute homesickness, or any difficulties of adjustment. And they certainly did not blend in perfectly', though he also reiterates that 'the British and Americans had much in common and [...] British emigration to the United States was unique for the relative ease of adjustment and assimilation.'<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Orm Øverland, *Immigrant Minds, American Identities. Making the United States Home, 1870-1930* (Urbana and Chicago: The University of Illinois Press, 2000), 56.

<sup>27</sup> William E. Van Vugt, *Britain to America. Mid-Nineteenth-Century Immigrants to the United States* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 2-3.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>29</sup> William E. Van Vugt, *British Buckeyes. The English, Scots, and Welsh in Ohio, 1700-1900* (Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 2006), 56, 60.

According to Patrick J. Blessing most Britons adapted effortlessly in America – with the exception of the Highland Scots in the colonial period, due to their peculiar culture and way of dressing. In fact, although ‘individual English, Welsh, and Lowland Scots generally felt some sense of alienation for a period after arrival, from earliest days these groups blended easily into American society.’<sup>30</sup> Among the traits characterizing the Scots overseas, Gordon Donaldson states, there were ‘their adaptability and capacity to assimilate. In the United States, they were generally willing to identify with other Americans of British descent, and in a wider sense their obvious affinities with many of the existing inhabitants facilitated their assimilation.’<sup>31</sup> With regard to the English, Charlotte Erickson remarks that, in America, they ‘patently did not share many of the disabilities and problems faced by other immigrants. They were rarely hyphenated: the term Anglo-American refers as much to native-born Americans as to English immigrants.’<sup>32</sup> Moreover, she points out that English immigrants did not normally organize politically, cluster in ethnic communities or join a single religious denomination and that, when they established ‘trade unions, cooperatives, friendly societies, churches, or communities, their institutions quickly became “Americanized.”’<sup>33</sup> According to Erickson, therefore, the cultural invisibility of the English translated into a very low level of institutional completeness.

The foregoing has already made clear that key factors supporting the thesis of British immigrants’ invisibility are the contrast with other waves of immigrants and the assumed cultural similarity between Britons and Americans. More examples will strengthen this crucial point. According to Maldwyn A. Jones, ‘[n]ative-born Americans, anxiously scanning the variegated army of newcomers arriving from Europe during the nineteenth century, tended to focus their gaze upon unfamiliar types. What caught their attention were the masses of Irishmen, Germans, Italians, Slavs and Jews; they paid much less heed to British immigrants.’<sup>34</sup> Rowland T. Berthoff also underlines that the cultural backgrounds of people from Britain made the United States ‘less bewildering than it was to other foreigners. [...] [T]he “assimilation” or “Americanization” of the British was relatively easy. With folkways and habits of

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<sup>30</sup> Patrick J. Blessing, *The British and Irish in Oklahoma* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980), 9.

<sup>31</sup> Gordon Donaldson, “Scots,” in *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*, ed. Stephan Thernstrom (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1980), 915.

<sup>32</sup> Erickson, *Leaving England. Essays on British Emigration in the Nineteenth Century* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994), 1.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>34</sup> Maldwyn A. Jones, *Destination America* (New York: Holt, Rineheart and Winston, 1976), 92.

thought acceptable to Americans, they enjoyed a unique advantage over most newcomers.<sup>35</sup> Finally, according to William Van Vugt, the ‘awareness that Britons and Americans had much in common *grew* in the later part of the [nineteenth] century as immigrants with unfamiliar languages and cultures arrived from southern and eastern Europe. By comparison the British were all but American already.’<sup>36</sup>

The similarity between British and American society, scholars point out, meant that Britons did not think of themselves as foreigners in America. In other words, they saw themselves as invisible immigrants. Eric Richards, for instance, contends that Britons ‘felt little alienation in the United States because it was a society outwardly akin to Britain itself,’<sup>37</sup> while Gordon Donaldson claims that newcomers ‘from Great Britain on the whole assimilated themselves readily to the American nation, mainly because it has always been hard to think of people speaking the same language as being different nationalities, and they were apt to identify themselves with other Americans of British descent as against those of other national origins.’<sup>38</sup> Moreover, Charlotte Erickson states that English immigrants in America ‘regarded themselves as belonging to the same ethnic stock as a majority of native-born whites.’<sup>39</sup>

However, historians also often acknowledge that Britons, despite their easy integration into American society, maintained a strong attachment towards their homeland. This surfaced in the hesitation many of them had in acquiring American citizenship, which implied renouncing allegiance to the Old Country and its rulers.<sup>40</sup> As proud children of a global power, Britons did not share the same eagerness of many other Europeans to seek naturalization. Indeed, they ‘were conscious of coming from the heart of the most powerful empire in the world to a country which, for all its rapid rise, had once been a British colony and which, in their opinion, owed most of its virtues to that fact. Moreover, as products of Victorian Britain they tended to be badly infected with prevailing jingoism.’<sup>41</sup> The census of 1920 reveals that 15% of the English

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<sup>35</sup> Rowland T. Berthoff, *British Immigrants in Industrial America, 1790-1950* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1968, 1953c.), 125.

<sup>36</sup> Van Vugt, *British Buckeyes*, 61.

<sup>37</sup> Eric Richards, *Britannia’s Children. Emigration from England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales since 1600* (London and New York: Hambledon and London, 2004), 173.

<sup>38</sup> Gordon Donaldson, *The Scots Overseas* (London: Robert Hale, 1966), 124. According to Donaldson, though he does not explain why, it was the Scots in particular who ‘had always had a great gift for assimilation, and most of them readily adopted the American idiom and ways of life [...]’ Ibid., 124.

<sup>39</sup> Charlotte Erickson, “English,” in *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*, ed. Stephan Thernstrom (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1980), 320.

<sup>40</sup> Berthoff, *British Immigrants*, 139.

<sup>41</sup> Jones, *Destination America*, 114.



and the Scottish male immigrants of voting age had not initiated the process of naturalization, as against only 9% of the Welsh, and the 1900 census supplies similar data. The naturalization process rates of other nationalities, such as the Irish, the Germans and the Scandinavians were higher, though not considerably so (11, 9 and 12 per cent respectively had not applied for citizenship). The Welsh had the highest proportion of fully naturalized citizens in both 1900 and 1920. This, according to Rowland T. Berthoff, did not happen because they were less attached to their homeland but because they were less loyal to the “Queen of England”.<sup>42</sup> These figures, admittedly, are not high. Yet one has to take into account that they concern only working age males and that, as Dorothee Schneider points out, until the 1920s ‘the number of those who filed a “declaration of intention” (first papers) was three or four times the number of those who were awarded citizenship.’<sup>43</sup> The Americanization campaign of the early decades of the twentieth century had apparently had a modest impact by the end of World War I.<sup>44</sup> It was more likely the passage of the immigrant quota laws in the 1920s that constituted the real turning point since, among other things, they ‘gave preference within the quotas to wives and minor children of U.S. citizens’. In fact, in 1920 most of foreign-born residents in the U.S. were not naturalized, and it was not until the 1930 census that the majority had become citizens.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, as we shall see below, many adult males chose to naturalize, or at least to take out their first papers, for a variety of pragmatic reasons rather than for conviction.

Such lukewarm attitude towards naturalization on the part of many British immigrants is sometimes interpreted as the absence of the *need* to become American citizens. This is ascribed to the possibility Britons had of remaining themselves in the U.S., which was in turn due to the essential cultural, social and political similarities of the two countries. The following passage, concerning English people’s reluctance in acquiring citizenship, is taken from an article written in 1900. It advances an argument to which many scholars of British emigration to the United States would still subscribe today, and extend to the Scots and the Welsh:

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<sup>42</sup> Berthoff, *British Immigrants*, 139-140.

<sup>43</sup> Dorothee Schneider, “Naturalization and U.S. Citizenship in Two Periods of Mass Migration (1890-1930 and 1965-2000)”, in *Mass Migration to the United States. Classical and Contemporary Periods*, edited by Pyong Gap Min, 161-197 (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 2002), 169.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 174, 169.

If we do not seek naturalization, if we remain true to the Old Flag, it is because we feel that we can do so without giving offence to our American friends, and, above all, without any conflict with the obligations which are imposed upon us by the hospitality which we enjoy here. [...] There is so much sympathy between our two countries, so great an analogy between their institutions, the system of law and justice being almost identical, that it is possible for us Englishmen in America to remain loyal to our Queen, and to fulfil our duties of – well, let me call it – honorary citizens of the United States, at one and the same time. [...] We Englishmen in America are perfectly satisfied with the system of government that we find in the United States, and are content to comply with all the laws and usages of the land, without desiring to modify them in any way.<sup>46</sup>

According to the predominant historical interpretation, not only did Britons feel at home in America, they were also felt to belong there. William Van Vugt, for instance, acknowledges Americans' feeling of cultural inferiority and competition towards Britain, which they tended to compensate for by emphasizing the greater liberty and equality they enjoyed in their country, but at the same time stresses that 'Americans recognized their historic and cultural ties to the mother country and sensed that they and British newcomers were "cut from the same cloth."' <sup>47</sup> The stronger cultural awareness shown by the Welsh and the Scots is believed not to have made any substantial difference in the way Americans viewed newcomers from Great Britain. As Rowland T. Berthoff affirms, 'Americans certainly regarded the Welsh and Scots no less warmly than they did the English.'<sup>48</sup> A clear example of the conventional wisdom about this subject is to be found in the introductory section to Shirley Blumenthal and Jerome S. Ozer's general overview of British emigration to the United States. This begins with the following sentence, which immediately establishes the "blood connection" between the American people and the mother country's colonists that makes both feel at home with each other:

Americans don't often think of early immigrants from the British Isles as immigrants. That may be because from the first, the English [Scots and Welsh are said to have joined the English by the middle of the eighteenth century] did not consider themselves aliens. They saw themselves not as immigrants, but as colonists, taking possession of the land that the luck of exploration, and success in war and diplomacy, had made theirs.<sup>49</sup>

Historians assert that, since British immigrants saw themselves and were regarded as sharing the essential elements of American culture, they felt less than other groups the need to establish distinctive political, economic and cultural institutions to protect and

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<sup>46</sup> F. Cunliffe-Owen, "Englishmen in the United States," *Forum* 29 (1900): 39.

<sup>47</sup> Van Vugt, *British Buckeyes*, 58.

<sup>48</sup> Berthoff, *British Immigrants in Industrial America*, 183.

<sup>49</sup> Shirley Blumenthal, Jerome S. Ozer, and Anne Phalon, *Coming to America: Immigrants from the British Isles* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1980), vii.

further their interests. Yet, at the same time, scholars acknowledge that first-generation British immigrants retained distinctive ethnic cultures and developed ethnic associations and institutions in the United States. Well-documented sections of important monographs on British emigration to the USA focus on (mainly) first-generation British emigrants' cultural practices and institutions. Rowland T. Berthoff, for instance, devotes two entire sections of his masterful work to the discussion of cultural themes, covering English, Scottish and Welsh immigrants' associations, ethnic celebrations and leisure time habits as well as various other culture-related subjects, such as sports and the British immigrant press.<sup>50</sup> William Van Vugt also provides a brief but detailed summary of various aspects of British ethnic culture. In particular, he dwells upon the maintenance of old traditions and mentions festivals and celebrations, ethnic societies, British-American newspapers and other practices making up a recognizable British ethnic culture.<sup>51</sup> Three of the most important Welsh cultural institutions – the Eisteddfod, the Gorsedd and the Gymanfa Ganu – have been examined by George Hartmann in his monograph on Welsh life in the U.S., which also includes a short chapter on Welsh societies and clubs,<sup>52</sup> and the cultural life of the thriving Welsh community of Scranton, PA, between 1860 and 1920 has been closely investigated by William D. Jones.<sup>53</sup> Finally, substantial work has also been conducted on a specific aspect of Scottish culture in the period under consideration, namely the Highland Games tradition.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Among the most important subjects mentioned are: St. George's, St. Andrew's and St. David's societies, the English Yuletide traditions and the Hogmanay's celebrations, cricket and football clubs, Highland games and curling, horse racing on the English model, religious ceremonies in Welsh, Burns clubs, and workingmen's associations. Cf. Berthoff, *British Immigrants in Industrial America*, 143-164 and 165-184.

<sup>51</sup> What Van Vugt, paraphrasing Berthoff, says about the retention of English traditional holidays is worth quoting, since it is normally the English who are considered the quickest to Americanize among the Britons: "British immigrants also retained their Old World culture on traditional holidays such as Christmas and Boxing Day. English-style feasts, celebrations, and methods of decoration for the Christmas season were distinct and more festive than the staid, Puritan-influenced American celebrations. The English brought their "Yuletide" traditions to America and were usually intent on keeping them alive. The celebrations of English immigrants on the Wisconsin frontier in the early 1840s nearly ended in disaster when terrified American neighbors mistook the midnight caroling for an Indian attack". Van Vugt. *Britain to America*, 150.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Edward G. Hartmann, *Americans from Wales* (Boston: The Christopher Publishing House, 1967), 139-155 and 156-62 respectively.

<sup>53</sup> Jones devotes a long section of his volume to Welsh culture in Scranton (and America), but observations on this theme are made throughout the book. Cf. William D. Jones, *Wales in America. Scranton and the Welsh 1860-1920* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1993), 87-145.

<sup>54</sup> Cf. Emily A. Donaldson. *The Scottish Highland Games in America*. Gretna, LA: Pelican, 1986, and Gerald Redmond. *The Caledonian Games in Nineteenth-Century America*. Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson U.P., 1971.

Welshmen and Scots, as has been pointed out, are generally deemed to have retained a stronger sense of ethnic identity than immigrants from England, which encouraged them to create distinctive social, cultural and religious institutions (in other words, unlike the English, Scots and Welsh are said to have had an appreciable degree of “institutional completeness”). Berthoff, for instance, notes the relatively small number of formal organizations created by English immigrants in America as against those of the Welsh and the Scots,<sup>55</sup> and Van Vugt singles out the English as the most “invisible” British ethnic group in Ohio.<sup>56</sup> Erickson, as noted above, also emphasizes the absence of a rich and long-lasting *English* immigrant culture in the United States. She portrays the English immigrant institutions as fragile,<sup>57</sup> and remarks that newspapers catering to English readers were few and did not last long. In fact, ‘a culture of institutions separate from those of native-born Americans never fully matured and disappeared almost without a trace in the rural West and Midwest.’<sup>58</sup>

In particular, it is the preservation of specific cultural traditions on the part of immigrants from *Wales* that is often emphasized, being closely connected to the fact that, throughout the nineteenth century and even beyond, a substantial number of Welsh did not speak English as their first language.<sup>59</sup> Van Vugt, for example, observes that the Welsh ‘maintained attitudes and culture in their Ohio communities that distinguished them from most English and Scottish immigrants.’ Besides, ‘their distinctive language and culture, their tendency to form enclaves, and their intense religiosity naturally led them to assimilate into American culture more slowly than the English or Scots.’<sup>60</sup> Van Vugt draws up an “assimilation league table” of British immigrants based on the

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<sup>55</sup> Berthoff, *British Immigrants in Industrial America*, 183.

<sup>56</sup> Van Vugt, *British Buckeyes*, x.

<sup>57</sup> ‘The St. George’s societies, one of which had appeared in New York as in other East Coast ports in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, served a social function for the elite but were not so successful in their aim of aiding recent immigrants. The St. George’s Society in New York widened its membership to include descendants of the English-born, immigrants from the empire, and British officers and their sons wherever born; but it still remained a small organization of merchants and professional people.’ Erickson, “English”, 333.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 332.

<sup>59</sup> In Wales, according to the 1891 census, about 55% of the population spoke Welsh, while in 1901 and 1911 the figures were 49.9 and 43.5 per cent respectively. In America, until the first decades of the twentieth century the percentage of exclusively Welsh speakers or speakers of both Welsh and English was still considerable. Admittedly, though, at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth the use of Welsh language and the culture associated with it was in decline, also as a consequence of the outlook of second-generation immigrants. Moreover, Welsh cultural institutions emphasized the importance of acquiring a good knowledge of English to be successful in the New World. William D. Jones, “The Welsh Language and Welsh Identity in a Pennsylvanian Community,” in *Language and Community in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Geraint H. Jenkins (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1998), 262, 270-72.

<sup>60</sup> Van Vugt, *British Buckeyes*, 78.

widespread notion that the English were the quickest to integrate in the U.S. and the Welsh the slowest (along with other groups also displaying strong cultural and linguistic distinctions such as settlers from Guernsey and the Isle of Man), with the Scots occupying the table's mid-position.<sup>61</sup> It must be noted, though, that when comparing American with Welsh culture scholars tend to downplay differences and argue that the Welsh adjusted easily *despite* their distinctive linguistic identity.<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, the essential resemblance between the Welsh and American cultures is taken for granted, and sometimes explicitly highlighted. William D. Jones, for instance, notes that the remarkable success of the 1875 American National Eisteddfod testified to the importance Welsh immigrants attached to their ethnic culture but at the same time observes that 'the eisteddfod's impact emphasized the similarities between the respectable, utilitarian and even "middle-class" character of Welsh culture and the dominant White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (or Anglo-American) ideology of the host country.'<sup>63</sup>

While scholars, as we have seen, suggest that ethnic culture was a tangible reality for the first generation of British immigrants, they contend that Britons' cultural heritage was abandoned sooner than it was the case with other nationalities. The "1.5" and, even more so, the second-generation are usually considered the turning point in the process of assimilation of Britons in the United States. Maldwyn A. Jones, for instance, notes that the cultural transition from British to Americans was completed by the immigrants' children, who absorbed the adopted country's ethos and culture at school and rarely considered themselves as anything but Americans.<sup>64</sup> Similarly, Erickson claims that the children of English immigrants 'assimilated more easily, and with less tension between generations, than those of most ethnic groups.'<sup>65</sup> Finally, Berthoff affirms that the children of English, Scottish and Welsh immigrants did not frequent the organizations founded to preserve the culture of the Old Country, unlike the descendants of other immigrants.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, based on the (supposed, as noted in the previous chapter) economic success which children of British immigrants achieved in the United States, Berthoff maintains that 'in a sense the British-Americans had no "second-generation," no ill-adjusted class, like the children of less fortunate foreigners, without firm roots in

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 64. On Guernsey and Manx immigrants to Ohio see pages 83-94.

<sup>62</sup> Cf., for example, Jones, "The Welsh Language and Welsh Identity," 263.

<sup>63</sup> Jones, *Wales in America*, 105.

<sup>64</sup> Jones, *Destination America*, 117.

<sup>65</sup> Erickson, "English," 331.

<sup>66</sup> Berthoff, *British Immigrants in Industrial America*, 210.

either the old or the new culture. In effect their children were simply Americans, neither better nor worse adapted to the normal life of the country than were the children of old-stock parents. They seldom thought of themselves as anything but Americans.’<sup>67</sup>

Historians also often assert that the vitality of the distinctive cultural elements Britons carried with them when they crossed the Atlantic was generally on the wane after 1900. They point out that specifically Old Country customs and institutions “Americanized” over time, and often view such transformation as a “decline”.

According to Berthoff, World War I constituted the watershed in the preservation of a British culture in America. After the conflict, the British-American community dwindled and the English and Scottish newspapers ceased publication. Berthoff admits that many societies and organizations continued to exist later on or were replaced by similar associations. Yet, in his opinion, the “period of innovation” of immigrant institutions was over by that time. With the exception of the Scottish Clans, which drew on the massive immigration of the 1920s, the fraternal societies were declining or about to disband: ‘[e]ven the new (1929) National Gymanfa Ganu Association has in effect replaced the elaborately planned *eisteddfod* with the simpler and impromptu hymn-singing meeting as the principal Welsh-American music festival. Thus the history of the British-American community since 1918 has been an epilogue to its vigorous nineteenth-century story.’<sup>68</sup> With regard to Welsh culture – the most distinctive and resilient of British cultures according to historians, as we have seen – William D. Jones remarks that, across the United States, ‘as the twentieth century progressed, one by one the Welsh churches closed, *eisteddfodau* became rarities, societies collapsed and even the *Drych* switched to English.’<sup>69</sup> Indeed, the change of certain Old Country cultural practices into forms more acceptable within the American social context is evident in the case of the Welsh *eisteddfod*, the most important and symbolic element of Welsh culture. In this competitions conducted in English or in both English and Welsh gradually substituted the exclusive use of Welsh to encourage the participation of the second and later-generation immigrants. Edward G. Hartmann identifies in the period 1870s-1890s the heyday of the *eisteddfod*. Like Jones, he also points out that, in time, ‘the Americanization of the various communities and the paucity of individuals able to handle the Welsh language well enough to compose in Welsh saw the disappearance of

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 210.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 211.

<sup>69</sup> Jones, *Wales in America*, 245.

competitions of this sort and the substitution of prizes for similar efforts in the English language.<sup>70</sup> The fact that the eisteddfod came eventually to be dominated by musical competitions, while in the early years the stress had fallen on the composition of poems and essays in the Welsh language, was a further sign of its Americanization.<sup>71</sup> However, Hartmann also observes that eisteddfods were still a vital reality well into the twentieth century – he mentions the important event which took place in Scranton in 1908, the 1913 Seattle Eisteddfod and the International Exposition Eisteddfod held in San Francisco in 1915 – so much so that, in 1923, the National Eisteddfod Association of America was established.<sup>72</sup>

A dissenting opinion on the common interpretation that the start of the twentieth century marked the inexorable decline of British immigrants' ethnic culture is offered by Angela McCarthy. She claims that, during the 1920s, social and cultural organizations kept Scottish identity alive in the United States, and preserved emotional and functional links between the Old Country and the land of adoption. The immigrants, for example, could count upon a network of formal Scottish agencies which helped them to adjust in America, especially immediately after their arrival.<sup>73</sup> Such agencies represented the rich heritage of the old tradition of emigration from Scotland overseas, and proved that Scottish identity in the U.S. in the interwar period was still strong.<sup>74</sup>

In conclusion, scholars acknowledge the preservation of distinctive cultural practices on the part of first-generation British immigrants – especially the Welsh and the Scots, whose comparative institutional visibility is also pointed out – as well as Britons' strong attachment to, and pride in, their mother country. Nonetheless, researchers claim that British immigrants blended into American society rather quickly and easily, that they felt at home and were felt to belong in the United States. Also, they assert that Britons' distinctive culture was not significantly retained by immigrants' children and declined

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<sup>70</sup> Hartmann, *Americans from Wales*, 146.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 148. Moreover, in 1929 a *gymanfa ganu* at Niagara Falls saw the participation of more than two thousands people and translated into the creation of a national association. David Maldwyn Ellis, "Welsh," in *Dictionary of American Immigration History*, ed. Francesco Cordasco (Metuchen, NJ, and London: The Scarecrow Press, 1990), 750.

<sup>73</sup> Angela McCarthy, "Ethnic Networks and Identities Among Inter-war Scottish Migrants in North America," in *A Global Clan. Scottish Migrant Networks and Identities Since the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Angela McCarthy (London and New York: Tauris Academic Studies, 2006), 205.

<sup>74</sup> "Indeed, for Scots in North America it is the frequent reference to Scottish societies which stands out when compared with stories of their associates settling elsewhere", Angela McCarthy, "Ethnic Networks and Identities Among Inter-war Scottish Migrants in North America," in *A Global Clan. Scottish Migrant Networks and Identities Since the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Angela McCarthy, 212. On formal networks and Scottish identity in the United States in the interwar period see *Ibid.* 212-17.

markedly in the twentieth century. This fast and easy cultural adaptation to the new country's ways is essentially ascribed to the strong similarity between the British and American cultures, and condensed into the definition of Britons as "invisible" immigrants. Furthermore, as we have noted, the contrast between "visible" and "invisible" immigrants in America draws on an implicit, and sometimes explicit, us-them, insider-outsider, visible-invisible ideological dichotomy, fostered by the ingrained assumption of a profound gulf between the life experiences of Britons in America and that of the members of other nationality groups, especially southern and eastern European immigrants.

Most importantly, the notion of British immigrants "invisibility" does not appear to be based on solid evidence. In other words, it is often stated rather than demonstrated. As noted in the Introduction, important facets of Britons' experience in America have been neglected by historians or require closer analysis, including ethnic culture, national identity and sense of belonging. In order to draw reasonably safe conclusions on these subjects, and on the issue of British immigrants' blending into American society, general works will have to be conducted along with case studies. Factors such as the period and geographical area of immigration, the urban or country character of settlement, the social class, occupation and nationality of immigrants need to be taken into consideration. In other words, to avoid simplistic generalizations, questions about the experience of specific groups in different times and places will have to be posed. Actually, the blanket definition of Britons as "invisible" immigrants undoubtedly also originates from a lack of historical analysis. Only after painstaking historiographical work will it be possible to provide a satisfactory answer to the question: "How visible were British immigrants to the USA?" Once detailed investigation has been carried out it might be found that Britons had a stronger or weaker cultural identity and were more or less visible in different periods of American immigration history and in different regions of the country, or that some occupational categories and ethnic groups, such as Midlands assembly-line workers in automobile plants in Detroit in the 1930s or Cornish miners in nineteenth century hard rock mines, for example, were more visible than others or had experiences comparable to those of immigrants of other nationalities. Indeed, miners in America were, so to speak, "visible" by definition, since they often lived in closed communities, had a "culture" of their own, were actively engaged in trade union activities and industrial conflict. Many of them were from Britain, some of



whom speaking an incomprehensible dialect. The racist remarks on Cornish miners quoted below, uttered by one of the FWP informants, seem to support this claim.

Hopefully, after conducting broad investigations and specific studies about this topic it will still be possible to make useful generalizations. Indeed, the aim of this chapter is to contribute, through the analysis of original sources, to the exploration of an aspect of British immigrants' experience which is too often taken for granted.

## II. New loyalties, old ties

The endorsement of a specific national identity is an indicator of people's sense of belonging and attachment to a given country. Immigrants' national self-identification, with their own native land or their land of adoption (or both), is therefore suggestive of a process of integration, or of resistance to integration, on the part of newcomers. Similarly, there is a connection between the acquisition of the adopted country's citizenship and immigrants' national identity feelings. Such relationship, though, is by no means direct. Indeed, there may be various factors hindering or favouring naturalization which are only feebly related to a sense of national belonging.<sup>75</sup>

The FWP and EI interviews shed light on both British immigrants' national self-identification and attitude towards naturalization. Several of the informants explicitly articulate an exclusive or predominant American identity. Most, though not all, of these were children at the time of emigration and had spent a long time or even the majority of their lives in the U.S. when they were interviewed. It seems that they had left their allegiance to the Old World unmistakably behind. Robert Smalley, aged nine when he arrived from England in 1875, considered himself to be American through and through. As he forcefully said, talking about World War II, 'it's the United States I'm looking out for.'<sup>76</sup> No doubt, such a strong expression of American identity could also be motivated by the surge of patriotic feelings originating from the outbreak of an international conflict (Smalley was interviewed in June 1940). Similarly, while a trainee at Ellis Island to become a Coast Guard serviceman (he enlisted in September 1941), Arthur Dickson sided with American boxers when they fought Britons – watching

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<sup>75</sup> According to Michael R. Olneck, '[i]ndices bearing most directly on the relationship between national identity and assimilation concern language, attitudes and values, self-identification, and citizenship.' Michael R. Olneck, "Assimilation and American National Identity," in *A Companion to American Immigration*, ed. Ueda Reed (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 212.

<sup>76</sup> Robert Smalley, FWP, 5.

boxing matches, apparently, was a favourite pastime for servicemen. The war climate and the fact that the informant obtained a government job might have prompted him to embrace a full American identity. Yet, most likely, Dickson's national identity option can also be explained by the informant's very young age at the time of emigration (he arrived when he was four): 'We, one time they had some British seamen come in, and we had already set up a boxing match, which was great, you know. All the yelling and screaming of the British against the Americans. So we enjoyed that. But I was rooting harder for the Americans than I was for the British.'<sup>77</sup>

Despite still feeling nostalgic when he thought about Scotland (he had left Tillicoultry at the age of nine), Thomas Allan considered himself lucky to have emigrated and viewed himself as an American. He portrayed the arrival and experience at Ellis Island as a veritable process of rebirth, the decisive step toward the forging of a new identity. Allan's view seems to be shaped by the traditional notion of America as a melting pot, in which immigrants dissolve their old identities and from which they emerge as new beings, and he identifies Ellis Island as the place setting off this transformation: 'I was born in Scotland and all the other people that have gone through Ellis Island were born in Germany, Russia, you name it. But they were actually ... this is the place of their re-birth.'<sup>78</sup> Likewise, William McGuire, aged seven when he left Lanarkshire, deemed America to be his real home. Interestingly, he explained his feelings by the fact that, in his view, America offered more opportunities than all other countries. In other words, behind the refashioning of this emigrant's identity lies the internalization of the idea of the America Dream. In the following passage, the prejudiced stance expressed by the informant on contemporary immigration can hardly go unnoticed. As is quite common, anti-immigration sentiments are conveyed by contrasting an imagined past when strict entry rules were applied to regulate the inflow of immigrants with a supposedly lax present in which the stream of foreigners is unchecked and many of the newcomers become a burden for the community:

Moore: So you think of yourself first as an American.

McGuire: That is correct.

Moore: But you still can think of yourself as Scottish, too?

McGuire: Not necessarily. I think that America has got so much over these countries, and that's why all these other people, they all want to come to America. And I still say they ought to go through channels

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<sup>77</sup> Arthur Dickson, EI, 24.

<sup>78</sup> Thomas Allan, EI, June 2001 interview, 25.

like I had to. They ought to have somebody sign a piece of paper that would allow them in here so they do not [...] so that they wouldn't be on welfare.<sup>79</sup>

Examples of (young) adult emigrants who express a predominantly American identity are supplied by Henry Safford and Arnold Ambler. Despite emigrating at 17 years of age, Safford is said to be 'thoroughly Americanized' by the fieldworker. Indeed, he uses the pronoun "they" and the expression "the English" when referring to his countrymen, never the inclusive pronouns "we" or "us".<sup>80</sup> Arnold Ambler was 21 when he left Yorkshire in 1920. Unlike his wife, as we shall see below, he feels decidedly more American than British. This is clearly illustrated by the shift in the use of personal pronouns in the following passage, in addition to the pride he displays in American wealth and work ethic. At the beginning, the pronouns "they" only refers to Americans, yet Ambler soon switches to "we", including himself among the natives. Finally, "they" is used to identify the "others", those who live on the other side of the ocean, in a world to which the informant does not belong anymore:

[T]he average American takes everything for granted. They're lucky, they're lucky, we have everything we want, mostly, here, in spite of the condition our country's in, we still are much better off than they are over there, three quarters of the population over there are unemployed and they don't want to work, and a lot of that is because they don't want to work.<sup>81</sup>

In contrast with the British immigrants who "feel American", a sizeable number of the FWP and Ellis Island informants – all of them adults or young adults when they left – express a strong sense of belonging to their native country, which is sometimes greatly emphasized or even explicitly contrasted to loyalty towards the United States. In these cases the British newcomers' national allegiance appears to be still firmly rooted in their English, Scottish and Welsh birthplaces overseas, which they call "home" and to which they are unequivocally attached. For instance, Margaret Kirk, aged 22 at the time of emigration, articulates her identity feelings quite clearly:

Sigrist: Let me, let me ask you a final question. Do you consider yourself more Scottish or more American?

Kirk: Oh, I'm more Scottish. I'll never be anything else but Scottish. [...] No, I'll always be Scottish. I'll do everything all proper here in America. But I, I, at heart I'll always be Scottish.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> William McGuire, EI, 29.

<sup>80</sup> Henry Safford, FWP, 1.

<sup>81</sup> Arnold Ambler, EI, 12.

<sup>82</sup> Margaret Kirk, EI, 67.

More examples are provided by Mr “B”, who refers to England as “my country”, and William Whytock, who expresses his pride for having been born in the capital of Scotland.<sup>83</sup> A close bond of affection also links Kyffin Williams to his homeland almost 80 years after emigration (he arrived in 1914 at 19 years of age), as shown by the fact that he used the inclusive pronoun “us” to refer to the Welsh and still called Wales “my country”.<sup>84</sup>

Several of the testimonies reveal that many British adult emigrants did not enjoy life overseas or felt at home in America. This makes it possible to infer with a good degree of probability that they were still emotionally attached to their native country and that they had not traded their old allegiance for a new one. Negative evaluations of America are almost exclusively provided, and a sense of estrangement from their new country almost exclusively felt, by people who crossed the Atlantic as (young) adults. This may be explained by the fact that children generally adapt more easily and quickly to a new reality. British child emigrants inevitably grew up to be Americans, at least in part. Above all, they had not lived long enough in Britain to share their parents’ deep attachment to the land of their birth and, before departure, they had not yet established lasting personal relationships in Britain or been profoundly affected by Old Country values and customs. Ken Johnson, for example, recalls that his parents, perhaps due to the rough times they went through and the financial difficulties with which they had to cope, did not really integrate into American society. They would have returned home if only they could have afforded it: ‘They never really got enough money together to go back to England, so they were kind of stuck over here and had to make a go of it.’<sup>85</sup> Patrick Peak’s father did not take to life in America, either. He had a worse job than in Scotland, and missed his friends and favourite pastime – playing and talking about football, two things he was unable to do in the United States. He also intended to return home:

[H]e really, he hated it over here because he was quite a soccer player over in the old country, you know, and he belonged to quite a few clubs and all that stuff and he left everyone. When he come over here he got the worst job, actually, over here than he ever had in the old country, you know. So he, I remember, he wrote and told my mother he was coming back [...].<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Mr “B.”, FWP, 3; William Whytock, FWP, 1.

<sup>84</sup> Kyffin Williams, EI, 44, 51.

<sup>85</sup> Ken Johnson, EI, 10.

<sup>86</sup> Patrick Peak, EI, 3.

The FWP and Ellis Island oral histories suggest that women were less happy than men in America, or perhaps that they were just more used to expressing their feelings (especially when related to complaints, failure, and bonds of affection?) while men were supposed to suppress them, reflecting patterns of socially acceptable behaviour. This might also be due to the fact that women, most of whom worked at home, relied on family networks and support to socialize and carry out their duties much more than men. By contrast, men could count on their workplace as a site of socialization and also enjoy the company of workmates in their leisure hours. Indeed, weaker networks meant less help and more isolation. Archibald Webster's mother, for instance, was unhappy in America, while his father apparently did not regret the move, though he visited his native Scotland many times.<sup>87</sup> Thomas Powell's mother did not feel happy in America, either. She eventually adjusted to life overseas after a long time, when her children married and she became a grandmother. In this case, it seems that only the creation of a new extended family made a difference by meeting this immigrant's emotional needs.<sup>88</sup> Arnold Ambler's wife never liked America. He recalls that he 'had one heck of a time getting her to become a citizen.'<sup>89</sup> Interestingly, she explained her reluctance with the fact that it would represent a betrayal of her native land and she did not want to swear against her King and Country.<sup>90</sup> This last example shows that there was an obvious, though by no means automatic, connection between dislike for America and resistance to naturalizing.

Finally, it is worth noting that, in addition to their specific national identity (English, Scottish or Welsh) emigrants of all three nationalities sometimes expressed a wider, supranational *British* identity, related to their identification with the imperial venture. For instance, when mention is made, during the conversation he is having with his friends, to the book *Decline and Fall of the British Empire*, Scotsman Andrew McCurrie 'snorts contemptuously' and expresses his disbelief about the future dissolution of the Empire.<sup>91</sup> Robert Williams's father also stresses a British, rather than a Welsh, identity. Indeed, he would have preferred moving to Canada to remain a British subject, and contrasts John Bull (the classic allegory of England, which he possibly views as representative of all Britain) with Uncle Sam:

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<sup>87</sup> Archibald Webster, EI, 18.

<sup>88</sup> Thomas Powell, EI, 22.

<sup>89</sup> Arnold Ambler, EI, 15.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>91</sup> Andrew McCurrie, FWP, 4, 15 February 1939 interview.

“Look here,” he says. “If you can show to me that Uncle Sam is better than John Bull, I’ll, I’ll consider it.” He didn’t say he’d do it but “I’ll consider it” but he never did. Then one time he thought if he went to Canada he’d be a British subject, see, and he wanted to go to Canada. And Mother said, “Absolutely no, absolutely no!”<sup>92</sup>

Similarly, at 17 years of age, Surrey-born Sidney Pike tried to enlist in the Canadian army to support British troops in World War I. He evidently still viewed himself as a citizen of the British Empire and, seven years after arrival in America, had not naturalized yet.<sup>93</sup>

The majority of the FWP and Ellis Island informants display a dual sense of belonging along a continuum that ranges from those who feel mainly English, Scottish or Welsh (and British) to those who articulate their national identity as essentially split between their native land and their adopted country. This is most likely due to the nature of the interview sample, largely made up of children who, having grown up in the U.S., predictably did not reject their American identity. Age does not seem to be a decisive factor in the preservation of emotional attachment towards the Old World. In fact, various child immigrants apparently retained their allegiance to Britain, which could be quite strong even though not exclusive. The role played by parents (the transmission of values and of a sense of belonging) and contact with fellow countrymen must have been important in these cases, as the example of Anne Nelson shows. The informant, seven years old when she arrived from West Lothian in 1923, clearly articulates a dual loyalty, though she seems to give a little more weight to her Scottish roots. This seems to be the case mainly because the informant grew up in a “Scottish environment” in which her cultural roots were kept alive and even strengthened in America by Scottish kith and kin. Indeed, especially in the case of child immigrants, maintaining a connection with one’s countrymen in America certainly help explain the retention of a strong emotional attachment to one’s homeland:

Levine: How do you, how do you think about yourself in terms of being a Scot and being an American?  
Nelson: Oh, I’m very proud of my background. Very, and I’m proud to be an American, too, you know. But you don’t forget. You know, I mean *when you’re surrounded by all Scots when I was growing up*, you know, at the parties, the singing the old songs, and you know, telling the old stories, it’s something that just gets inside of you. Yeah.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Robert Williams, EI, 50.

<sup>93</sup> Sidney Pike, EI, 19.

<sup>94</sup> Ann Nelson, EI, 35-36 (emphasis added).

Informants do not often discuss their dual allegiance explicitly, though this can be plausibly inferred from their actions and statements. Arthur Cave, for instance, wished to return to London one day and open a restaurant featuring typically American dishes such as hamburgers, hot dogs and corn on the cob.<sup>95</sup> Attachment to his homeland coexists with adjustment to the customs – dietary in this case – of his country of adoption, resulting in a cultural syncretism which often characterizes permanent emigrants. Thomas Sargent’s father, as we shall see below in more detail, still called himself a native of England and decided to visit his homeland almost half a century after emigration. Yet, when he arrived there, he felt “like a fish out of water” and realized how much of an American he had become. And again: John Flint was only 9 when he emigrated, but after working for years as a cowboy he decided to return to England. Perhaps this decision was prompted by his unsatisfactory financial situation, though he evidently still felt connected to the Old Country, which he called his “native home”. However, he eventually abandoned his plan to leave. After driving cattle to Dodge City and shipping bridle, spurs and saddle to Philadelphia, he changed his mind and resumed his life as a cowboy.<sup>96</sup> Finally, John Hammond’s enduring attachment to his native land is shown by his enthusiasm about the 1930s visit of the King and Queen of England to the United States. Indeed, he took a trip to Washington in order not to miss this special event and stood in the crowd saluting the royal couple when they drove through the city. His words convey the fervour he felt: ““Oh! The Queen!” murmurs Johnnie, once again, “Yes, we could have *touched* her.””<sup>97</sup> John also returned “home” for a visit. However, he said he was glad to have come back to America. Besides, after arrival ‘he read only the *London Times* but now, in the home of his adoption, he scarcely ever opens it.’<sup>98</sup> Hammond thus seems to offer a classical example of adaptation to the New World and concurrent retention of elements of the original national identity. His quick remark about the *London Times*, in particular, reveals that a dual (or a pre-eminently American) identity is usually acquired *gradually* by immigrants after an initial period of stronger affection for one’s homeland – unfortunately, however, the gradual nature of the immigrants’ process of adaptation to the New World is rarely discussed in the sources.

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<sup>95</sup> Arthur Cave, FWP, 3.

<sup>96</sup> John Flint, FWP, 6-7.

<sup>97</sup> John Hammond, FWP, 6.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

In conclusion, a few British immigrants in our sample viewed themselves as Americans, whereas others confirmed their loyalty to the Old Country. Still others, the largest group in the sample, held a dual or a mixed national identity, negotiating a new sense of belonging in the host country. The number of those who emphasize their Englishness, Scottishness, Welshness or Britishness is undoubtedly significant. If to these we add the immigrants who displayed a dual national sense of belonging, the persistent strong bond of Britons with their native land becomes evident.

The share of immigrants who fully identified with their country of origin is all the more noticeable when we consider the nature of the interviews corpus, which is made up, as we have seen, of a greater number of people who emigrated as children (particularly in the case of the Ellis Island oral histories). In fact, since adults are usually viewed as identifying with their birth country, it is reasonable to surmise that, with a sample of informants including a larger number of adult emigrants, the examples of exclusive loyalty to the Old Country would have been more numerous. Besides, it needs to be taken into account that, in a conversation, people generally avoid expressing opinions which strongly differ from what their interlocutors say or what they assume their interlocutors expect to hear. This is certainly the case in an oral history interview, which is often characterized by an imbalance of cultural power between interviewer and interviewee and in which the interviewee is ultimately “authorized” to speak by the researcher.<sup>99</sup> In fact, the risk in oral history is conformity rather than the expression of potentially controversial points of views, unless these are solicited by the interviewer, even by challenging the interviewee’s assumptions, and a close relationship is established between fieldworker and informant.<sup>100</sup> Indeed, as has already been noted, informants tend to meet the supposed expectations of fieldworkers (forming an idea of

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<sup>99</sup> As Alessandro Portelli perceptively observes, ‘the interviewer defines the roles and establishes the basis of narrative authority. In fact, although an oral autobiographical narrative may look on the surface very much like any other autobiographical *text*, it constitutes a very different autobiographical *act*, because the basis of authority is different. Autobiography (especially if written for publication) begins with a person’s decision to write about herself or himself, but in the interview the initiative is taken by the interviewer, from whom the legitimacy to speak is ostensibly derived. The right to speak, especially about oneself, is not automatically assumed, especially among the socially disadvantaged groups to which oral historians most frequently address themselves.’ Alessandro Portelli, “Oral History as Genre”, in Id. *The Battle of Valle Giulia. Oral History and the Art of Dialogue*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 9.

<sup>100</sup> In this connection Portelli remarks that ‘[t]he less the historians reveal about their identity and thoughts, the more likely informants are to couch their testimony in the broadest and safest terms, and to stick to the more superficial layers of their conscience and the more public and official aspects of their culture. [...] [A] critical, challenging, even a (respectfully) antagonistic interviewer may induce the narrator to open up and reveal less easily accessible layers of personal knowledge, belief, and experience.’ Portelli, “Oral History as Genre,” 12.



what such expectations are from their opinion of the interviewers, their research project, the questions they ask and the views they put forward).<sup>101</sup>

It is thus reasonable to surmise that in a country such as the United States – which is characterized by strong national pride and whose self-image is embodied by the American Dream myth – the venting of criticism of the predominant cultural values or the expression of a strong sense of estrangement from the American way of life is generally not expected or socially approved. This is even truer in the case of immigrants, who are supposed to be grateful for the chances their land of adoption has offered them (all the more so in the context of America’s predominant self-representation as the land of opportunity, where newcomers are expected to be willing to trade their old ties with new and “better” ones). Self-censorship, therefore, could therefore operate in such circumstances. Moreover, in this case fieldworkers represented public governmental institutions and national symbols, namely an agency of the Rooseveltian New Deal (the Federal Writers’ Project) and one of the symbolic sites of American identity (Ellis Island). To find fault with America and express preference for one’s birth country may not have been an obvious course of action for the interviewees, especially when talking to the Ellis Island researchers, given the already-noted celebratory slant of their project. The quotation from Margaret Kirk reproduced above makes this clear. As we have seen, Kirk expressed her undivided allegiance to Scotland but at the same time felt the need to assure the interviewer she behaved “properly” in America – ‘I’ll always be Scottish. I’ll do everything all proper here in America. But I, I, at heart I’ll always be Scottish.’ The informant’s digression is short but meaningful. Indeed, her words seem to be dictated by the worry that her national loyalty might be taken as a sort of ingratitude towards the U.S., or as a sentiment possibly leading to unsuitable conduct – in other words, Kirk takes for granted the association in American culture between embracing an American identity and behaving “properly.” The foregoing also helps to explain why negative evaluations of the migratory experience and manifest unenthusiastic sentiments towards the U.S. tend to be hidden by the informants and surface only obliquely, by referring to other people’s feelings and opinions. Indeed, hardly any of the informants explicitly expresses a pessimistic

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<sup>101</sup> Paul Thompson observes that the mere “social presence” of the fieldworker, even when he or she does not explicitly express any opinions that could influence the interviewee, produces a bias in the informant’s responses. On the importance of the social characteristics of the interviewer in affecting the informant’s replies see Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000; 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1978), 139-41.

assessment of their experience in America. Negative feelings towards the United States are normally *reported*, said to have been the opinion and sentiments of somebody else.

The bond between many British immigrants and their mother country as well as, at times, their sense of alienation in America, is also revealed by Britons' attitude towards the issue of naturalization. The FWP and Ellis Island oral histories show that, in a few cases, adult British emigrants decided to naturalize within a few years after arrival. William Platt, for instance, received his "first papers" three years after entering the U.S.,<sup>102</sup> while Thomas Muir applied for naturalization as soon as he arrived. For younger emigrants the procedure was quicker. Indeed, Muir 'was young enough, that he only needed one set of Naturalization papers; if you are past twenty-one years of age when you enter the United States from a foreign country you have to have two sets of Naturalization papers.'<sup>103</sup>

Immigrants who naturalized did not necessarily "feel home" in America or happily embraced a new identity. In fact, there were various factors, some of them eminently pragmatic, that prompted Britons to take up their citizenship papers. This was especially the case with household heads, as the possibility of finding employment was often connected to holding citizenship. Moreover, a sizeable number of British immigrants in America did not naturalize, and many did not wish to do so. Arnold Ambler, for instance, offers an unmistakable example of "pragmatic" naturalization. He did not take out his citizenship papers due a genuine desire to acquire American citizenship but, as he plainly states, because 'I've got a job to do, I've got a family.'<sup>104</sup> The testimony of Jack Carnegie shows that Britons who emigrated as children (he arrived in 1921, aged 5) could also delay their application for citizenship (when they had not acquired it automatically on their fathers' naturalization) and ultimately lodge it out of necessity rather than desire. During the Great Depression, in fact, it was easier to obtain employment if one was a citizen: 'So, you know, things were bad in that Depression, and I had to get this derivative citizenship. So that's what I went and did and then I got a job in Wright's Aviation, not as an electrician. In a foundry pouring metal, hard work.'<sup>105</sup> As Dorothee Schneider remarks, during the Great Depression many immigrants 'may have taken out citizenship papers in order to qualify for Works

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<sup>102</sup> William Platt, FWP, 8.

<sup>103</sup> Thomas Muir, FWP, 2.

<sup>104</sup> Arnold Ambler, EI, 26.

<sup>105</sup> Jack Carnegie, EI, 13.

Progress Administration (WPA) jobs or other New Deal programs open only to U.S. citizens. Others were requested to become American citizens by their private-sector employers.<sup>106</sup> Finally, Ken Johnson recalled that his parents naturalized as soon as they could, which seems in contradiction with the fact that his mother was not enthusiastic about this move.<sup>107</sup> Pragmatic motives, rather than attachment to America, are more likely to have prompted the informant's parents' (or at least his mother's) decision.<sup>108</sup>

Among the Britons that did not want to naturalize was Robert Williams's father who, as noted above, retained a strong feeling of British identity.<sup>109</sup> Likewise, as we have seen, Arnold Amber's wife did not like life in America and objected to the idea of having to deny allegiance to her King and Country. Clearly, one of the factors prompting British immigrants to resist naturalization was that it implied renouncing their old citizenship. Jack Carnegie's mother did not want to take out her naturalization papers either, as she thought (or perhaps hoped?) that she might go back to Scotland one day. Indeed, she never became an American citizen.<sup>110</sup> In this connection, it is worth recalling that for most of the period under consideration women, no matter how they felt about the issue of naturalization, acquired citizenship automatically when their husbands did. The final decision to naturalize rested therefore on the household heads, and that is why many of the FWP and Ellis Island informants became citizens, even if some reluctantly so.<sup>111</sup> It was the Cable Act of 1922 that separated the naturalization of married women from that of their husbands and made rules and qualifications to acquire citizenship uniform for men and women. Women's resistance to naturalization before that date (as well as, more generally, on the *reasons* why Britons took up citizenship) can be detected from the opinion they expressed on this issue or their feelings about it rather than from statistics. Oral histories, no doubt, are apt sources to shed light on immigrants' feelings and the motives behind their decisions. The sources provide various examples of women who had not naturalized before 1922 or arrived after the passing of the Cable Act and chose not to become citizens. This confirms their

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<sup>106</sup> Schneider, "Naturalization and U.S. Citizenship", 176.

<sup>107</sup> Ken Johnson, EI, 4-5.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>109</sup> Robert Williams, EI, 50.

<sup>110</sup> Jack Carnegie, EI, 13.

<sup>111</sup> '[B]etween 1855 and 1921 married women automatically assumed the nationality of their husbands under the American law and could not petition for naturalization in their own right.' Schneider, "Naturalization and U.S. Citizenship", 170.

aforementioned reluctance to take out another country's citizenship. When they could make a different choice from their husbands, some of them did.<sup>112</sup>

In addition to Jack Carnegie's mother (who arrived in 1921, when evidently her husband had not become a citizen yet)<sup>113</sup>, the Ellis Island interviews supply various other examples of married women who did not naturalize or postponed their naturalization. This is the case with Kathleen Harlow's mother, for instance, who emigrated in 1920. Apparently, it took her a long time to eventually decide to apply for her first papers (unfortunately, the informant is not specific on this and the interviewer did not inquire).<sup>114</sup> Doreen Stenzel's mother never naturalized (they left for America in 1929),<sup>115</sup> and this is also the case with Edith Ryan, aged 26 when she landed in New York in 1921. Interestingly, Ryan was reticent and on the defensive when she was asked about the reason for her choice (a reaction that indeed reveals the social pressure many immigrants must have felt to become citizens). The fact that she still defined herself as English, as she revealed later on in her interview, might be related to this: 'I am just as good as a citizen', she says, 'I do my bit and, you know, I help hither and thither. [...] A piece of paper doesn't mean anything. I could be a better citizen than those that are citizens.'<sup>116</sup>

Summing up, the main reason why a substantial number of Britons did not naturalize should not be sought in the fact that they already "felt home" in America – as we have seen, many did not. Undoubtedly, the relative similarity of important traits of their culture with some of the dominant cultural elements of the receiving country and the fact that they were perceived as less of a threat in comparison with other, more "different" newcomers, relieved them of some of the pressure to demonstrate their loyalty to America. Thus, Britons' choice not to become American citizens (or to do so mainly for pragmatic reasons) is all the more significant as it may reveal what they really wanted. Along with a sense of alienation in America, factors such as strong attachment to their own birth country and reluctance to forsake British citizenship played an important part in many immigrants' resistance to naturalizing. These influences help to explain why Britons' percentage of naturalization was one of the

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 171.

<sup>113</sup> Incidentally, Jack Carnegie's father possibly never naturalized or, if he did so, he did it later in life since Jack, a little child at arrival, took out his citizenship papers during the Great Depression, as we have seen.

<sup>114</sup> Kathleen Harlow, EI, 31.

<sup>115</sup> Doreen Stenzel, EI, 41.

<sup>116</sup> Edith Ryan, EI, 15-16.

lowest among immigrant groups in America. Finally, as we have seen, the FWP and Ellis Island oral histories show that women were more reluctant to acquire American citizenship than men. This might confirm that British immigrants' decision to naturalize was often made out of calculation. In fact, women's behaviour was conditioned less by practical reasons than was the case with men, as they seldom worked outside the home or were heads of households. This makes their stronger attachment to the British citizenship, perhaps, more representative of the sentiments of all British immigrants.

### **III. Longing for home**

The feeling of homesickness as well as the return visits FWP and Ellis Island informants paid or wished to pay to their native country also provide more than a glimpse of the permanence of British immigrants' emotional connections with their homeland.

The Ellis Island oral histories offer many examples of Britons' deep longing for their family, home, and old life. It is a feeling that newcomers from England, Scotland and Wales shared. Both men and women, adult and child immigrants, were not immune to this sentiment. Yet adult emigrants seem to have suffered from homesickness more acutely than people who left Britain as children, though cases of homesick child immigrants are also to be found. Sidney Pike, who was eleven when he left Surrey in 1910, provides a clear example of a homesick child immigrant. Indeed, he missed that most English of customs (the afternoon cup of tea) and yearned for the food he relished as a child in his native land: 'I wish I could find them here, pork pies, uh, muffins and crumpets, and afternoon tea at four o'clock.'<sup>117</sup> Likewise, women apparently missed home more than men. But again, as in the case of naturalization and adaptation to life in America, the difference between men and women may essentially be due to the fact that women manifested their feelings more openly than men. Harry Sonnes's mother, for instance, felt nostalgic for England,<sup>118</sup> while Thomas Sargent's mother always wanted to return to London because she missed her family, and she actually went back on a four-week visit only a few years after emigration.<sup>119</sup> More than 30 years after

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<sup>117</sup> Sidney Pike, EI, 3.

<sup>118</sup> Harry Sonnes, EI, 28.

<sup>119</sup> Thomas Sargent, EI, 29.

emigration, Arnold Ambler's wife still wished she could live in England.<sup>120</sup> Indeed, she was so insistent on returning that eventually her husband gave in and the couple moved back. Yet, for a variety of reasons, their stay did not last long. In fact, Arnold was hired by Austin Motor Car Company but did not like his job. Moreover, he had only a six-month permit from work in America (evidently, he wanted to use this period to see if resettlement in England was feasible) and had already taken out his "first papers" to become a U.S. citizen. Finally, the couple's budget was being affected negatively by the move and, in addition to that, Arnold's wife contracted inflammatory rheumatism and was told she would benefit from a dry climate.<sup>121</sup> This example shows that homesickness could create tension in a married couple and that the roots immigrants inevitably put down in their country of adoption (in this case mainly *economic* roots) could frustrate their desire to return home. As the informant openly admits: 'And yes, I think a lot about my country, but I also had to look at the point where, what kind of a work was I going to do.'<sup>122</sup> This also shows that the realities of life at home conflicted with an idealized vision of one's country, which fed upon nostalgia. For some, the dream of America had changed into the dream of home, yet both dreams were contradicted by reality.

Emigrants grew homesick because they had left behind family, friends or, sometimes, romantic liaisons, and they felt lonely in America. This is the case with Joseph Delaney, who sorely missed his old life in Scotland: 'After all, I'd left – I'd left all my companions over there, and girlfriend, and here I am in a strange country.'<sup>123</sup> The fact that, for some, homesickness was stronger at the beginning of their stay in America and could fade or even disappear in the long run is evident in Robert Reese's testimony. Robert was 18 when he moved. After arrival, he recalls, 'I was homesick. I was really homesick. If I had enough money, after I stayed here a while I didn't get a job. I couldn't find a job here. [...] But if I had my money, if I had, about three or four weeks after I came, if I had, I'd have gone right back.'<sup>124</sup> However, at the time of interview he claimed he did not miss Wales anymore.<sup>125</sup> Finally, Robert Williams's father also contemplated return to his native Wales, causing tension with his wife (a woman who,

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<sup>120</sup> Arnold Ambler, EI, 24.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>123</sup> Joseph Delaney, EI, 37.

<sup>124</sup> Robert Reese, EI, 34.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 41.

evidently, did not feel homesick).<sup>126</sup> The examples of Joseph Delaney, Robert Reese and Robert William clearly show that men could also have a deep yearning for the place in which they grew up.

As pointed out in Chapter 5, the Ellis Island corpus of oral histories includes a very small number of interviews with returnees. Some of them, as we have seen, went back for economic reasons. In other cases homesickness was one of the factors that prompted emigrants to return home permanently, though usually not the crucial one. Longing for home is mentioned as a primary motive urging the mothers of two informants to go back to Scotland. According to Sarah Twaddle, her mother decided to remigrate because she was homesick and had not adapted in the U.S. Besides, she had just had another baby and simply ‘couldn’t handle that.’ In Scotland, the informant points out, she would be able to rely on her mother’s help, while in America there was no relative living near.<sup>127</sup> Jean MacLuskie also recalls that her mother went back in 1931, having emigrated four years before, because she ‘suffered from terrible homesickness.’ She returned home for a visit and decided not to cross the ocean westward again (indeed, sometimes visits could change into permanent returns). MacLuskie also reveals that her mother had a two-year old child to look after, which probably played a part in her decision. The family’s economic conditions, instead, did not apparently influence her choice, as demonstrated by the fact that Jean’s father could afford a Model T Ford in America.<sup>128</sup> In both of these cases it seems that the main reason for leaving was the lack of family networks rather than sheer homesickness. Homesickness, probably, compounded these emigrants’ difficulties in tackling problems in the new country, or might even have been consequent on the major problems these women had to face, such as raising children alone. In this connection it is worth underlining that, on the evidence considered here, women seem to have missed home and wished to return more than men also because, in their native country, they would be able to benefit again from the help of relatives in dealing with family duties.

Homesickness, as we have seen, urged many to pay visits to their mother country. Immigrants normally left some members of their family as well as friends behind, and they had memories of places and events which were often embellished by nostalgia for the times gone by. It is mainly, though by no means exclusively, the Ellis Island

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<sup>126</sup> Robert Williams, EI, 50.

<sup>127</sup> Sarah Twaddle, EI, 9; 16.

<sup>128</sup> Jean MacLuskie, EI, 7.

informants and their parents that made return visits to Britain, perhaps because they lived most of their life in an era (from the end of World War II to the year 2000 and beyond) marked by economic expansion and the rise of living standards, as well as by the availability of fast and relatively cheap means of transport. In fact, the Ellis Island informants seem to have crossed the ocean eastward later in life, often after retirement, when they had the time and money to do so. Some FWP and Ellis Island interviewees, though, visited home at the end of the nineteenth century and in the first decades of the twentieth, when crossing the Atlantic had become significantly faster and less expensive than in the previous era. It is also worth noting that adult emigrants seem to have gone back more often than people who emigrated as children. This might be due to the fact that they had more memories of the Old World and stronger ties with home than child emigrants. Thomas Powell's parents, for instance, went back to Wales on a visit twice,<sup>129</sup> while the Welsh minister Richard Lloyd returned home once.<sup>130</sup> Harry Norbury, instead, apparently returned to England as many as ten times!<sup>131</sup> Arnold Ambler and his wife also crossed the Atlantic eastward quite often (five times) and at the woman's request they even returned home temporarily, as we have seen.<sup>132</sup> This confirms the possible connection between visits home, the contemplation of remigration and actual return (sometimes only temporary) to one's native land.

Emigrants who were children at the time of leaving also returned home for a visit, yet they usually did it several decades after emigration, often, though not always, in relatively old age, when the impulse of nostalgia is felt more strongly. In fact, they frequently still had relatives across the Atlantic whom they wished to meet, or perhaps they wanted to locate the spots where they played as children or know better the country their parents talked so much about. Thomas Powell, for instance, went back to Wales in 1969, 56 years after emigration (he was 8 when he landed in New York in 1913). On his visit, he was surprised to see television antennas on every house in his native village. Apparently, he had a "frozen" image of his native land, fostered perhaps by the ingrained idea of Europe as the "Old World" and America as a new, technologically advanced country.<sup>133</sup> Actually, when they were made a long time after emigration, visits back home could highlight the difference between reality and expectations. The

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<sup>129</sup> Thomas Powell, EI, 34.

<sup>130</sup> Richard Lloyd, FWP, 32.

<sup>131</sup> Harry Norbury, EI, 13.

<sup>132</sup> Arnold Ambler, EI, 15, 24.

<sup>133</sup> Thomas Powell, EI, 13.



homeland emigrants (both adults and children) thought about and wished to see again was more a “country of the mind” than a real place. The difference existed not only between memories and contemporary reality, but also between the emigrants’ old and new self. Emigrants had changed abroad, acquired new habits and different tastes, and might find out that they simply did not feel “home” anymore where home once was. Indeed, they might realize that their attachment was to a lost world. Thomas Sargent’s father went back in 1978, 45 years after leaving, to visit his sister. He felt disappointed, because life in his birth country had changed tremendously, and England was no longer the place he had cherished in his memory. At the time of interview he still styled himself as a “native” of England. However, he admitted he had not recognized his mother country after so much time and had realized that America was his true home now. Indeed, he had cut his visit short and flown back to the United States.<sup>134</sup>

Trips to Britain could be camouflaged attempts to return for good rather than mere “visits” home, especially when they were made within a relatively short time after emigration. George Wray and his wife, for instance, went back to England after five years. The fact that they had been at least *thinking* of returning for good and were not just “visiting friends”, as the informant states, is quite clear from the testimony: ‘However, when we reached England, we both found that we had no desire to remain there, as there were not the opportunities there were in the United States.’<sup>135</sup> Finally, in some cases the emigrants wanted to pay a visit to their homeland but did not do it, for a variety of reasons. They might realize, for example, that they had new priorities in America which held them back. This shows that immigrants’ connection with their mother country had to be renegotiated when they decided to stay permanently abroad and start a new life and family there. Robert Williams, for instance, could not afford a trip to Wales as he decided to use his financial resources to meet the expenses of his daughter’s college education.<sup>136</sup>

Return visits were only one of the ways in which British emigrants maintained contact with their homeland and people of their own nationality. In addition, they cemented ties with their fellow countrymen on both sides of the Atlantic by

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<sup>134</sup> Thomas Sargent, EI, 42-43. Incidentally, Thomas Sargent’s is another example of a dual sense of belonging, feeding on a mix of past and present, on memories of the old times in Britain and the reality of everyday life in America.

<sup>135</sup> George Wray, EI, 2.

<sup>136</sup> Robert Williams, EI, 51.

corresponding with them, keeping informed about affairs in their native country, intra-marrying and, as we shall see in the next section, by joining ethnic associations and participating in public events meant to celebrate their distinctive national culture.

The relative high rate of intermarriage between Britons and Americans is another of the elements scholars often mention to support the thesis of the smooth integration of British immigrants in America, though they also acknowledge that, for Britons as for other ethnic groups, intermarriage was far from being the rule. As Charlotte Erickson observes, the available evidence on immigrant marriages in the nineteenth century ‘seems conclusive that the British married Americans more frequently than did other immigrant groups. Yet the letters remind us that this step was not taken lightly. Adult immigrants tried very hard to find English or Scottish wives. Each non-British marriage was justified on special grounds.’<sup>137</sup> The FWP and Ellis Island interviews cannot provide decisive evidence supporting or refuting this suggestion. However, it is worth noting that they offer more examples of *intramarriage* (sometimes, between people of the same locality rather than just the same nationality) than intermarriage. Kyffin Williams, for instance, married a girl from his own Welsh town who had also emigrated to Utica, NY,<sup>138</sup> while one of the two sons of a Scottish quarryman married a girl from Scotland (the other married an Irish girl instead).<sup>139</sup> In order to find a partner from their own nationality some immigrants even went through the trouble of returning to the Old Country, as in the case of Mrs Buchanan’s father-in-law, who sailed back to England to find a wife.<sup>140</sup> The interviews show that people who arrived as children in America, or even later-generation British immigrants, could also marry within their group. For instance, Ellen Roberts, who had emigrated from North Wales in 1869 at the age of five, married a Welshman,<sup>141</sup> while Mr “B” was married to a second-generation English girl.<sup>142</sup> Finally, the wife of Mrs “L”’s brother (a third-generation Englishman) was an English girl he had met in Bridgeport, CT.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Erickson, *Invisible immigrants*, 72.

<sup>138</sup> Kyffin Williams, EI, 47.

<sup>139</sup> “A Scottish quarryman’s widow, FWP, 4.

<sup>140</sup> Mrs Buchanan, FWP, 2.

<sup>141</sup> Ellen Roberts, FWP, fieldworker’s notes.

<sup>142</sup> Mr “B.”, FWP, 2.

<sup>143</sup> Mrs “L.”, FWP, 5. With regard to interethnic marriages, two examples are supplied by Thomas Allan, who married a second-generation German-American (Thomas Allan, EI, 22) and Pepe Perez’s parents. In fact, Pepe’s Spanish father had emigrated to Barre, Vermont, where he had met his Scottish wife (“In the Hole”, FWP, fieldworkers’s notes). In a town with a high percentage of immigrant population such as Barre, where people of various nationalities worked in granite quarries and sheds, it was obviously easier for newcomers to intermarry. About Robert Reese (a Welshman) we are only told that he did not marry

The FWP and Ellis Island oral histories offer plentiful evidence of British emigrants who regularly corresponded with kith and kin in their land of birth, testifying to the transatlantic emotional links maintained by British emigrants in America with their homeland. Robert Reese, for instance, exchanged letters with his family in Wales, “Captain X” stayed in touch with his brother and sisters in England, and Sidney Pike often wrote to people in his native Surrey village.<sup>144</sup> Other examples are provided by Thomas Powell’s mother, who corresponded with her sister in Wales,<sup>145</sup> and by Ken Johnson’s family members, who wrote ‘tons of letters’ to their relatives in England. During World War II and Britain’s austerity years the Johnsons also sent food packages across the ocean. Immigrant networks could evidently operate not only to the advantage of people who wanted to emigrate but also of those who had stayed behind.<sup>146</sup>

Personal letters did not usually convey much information on general issues related to the social, political and economic situation of the immigrants’ mother country. To be updated on the state of affairs in their native land immigrants often looked at newspapers. Mr “B.”, for example, read the *Morning Telegraph*, the *Evening Post* and the *Times Star*. Perhaps such strong interest in the news from home was due to the recent outbreak of World War II in Europe (Mr “B.” was interviewed in January 1940), which incidentally would also suggest that the informant was seriously worried about, and still very much attached to, his mother country. After 35 years in the United States, the Welsh minister Richard Lloyd kept informed on life across the Atlantic through personal correspondence, by listening to foreign news on the radio as well as by reading and even filing clippings from the *British Weekly*.<sup>147</sup> Immigrants could be interested (or more interested) in obtaining local rather than national news, as the testimony of Andrew MacCurrie demonstrates. In fact, he kept up with events in the Old Country, in particular those concerning his birthplace, by regularly perusing the newspaper published in the region of Scotland from which he came. This also shows that Old Country newspapers had a significant readership overseas where a substantial community of emigrants existed (in this case, in Connecticut) whose ties with the homeland were still strong. The attention MacCurrie gives the pages of the Scottish

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within his own ethnic group (Robert Reese, EI, 47), while the interview with Mrs Glasson offers one of the few cases in the sources of intermarriage between a British immigrant (Mr Glasson, the informant’s husband) and an American (Mrs Glasson, FWP, 2).

<sup>144</sup> Robert Reese, EI, 21; “Captain X”, FWP, 7; Sidney Pike, EI, 8.

<sup>145</sup> Thomas Powell, EI, 33.

<sup>146</sup> Ken Johnson, EI, 10-11.

<sup>147</sup> Richard Lloyd, FWP, 32.

local paper, captured by a FWP fieldworker, demonstrates that the informant's bond with his homeland had not weakened over time:

It is too early for the afternoon edition of the Waterbury paper, and I glance over Mr. MacCurrie's shoulder to discover that he is perusing the *People's Journal*, published, I believe, at Inverallochy, Scotland, and sent periodically to Thomaston. Arrival of the *People's Journal* generally signals the spiritual departure of Mr. MacCurrie from the Fire House. The MacCurrie occupying the chair by the window is merely a substantial shell. MacCurrie proper is thousands of miles away among the bluebells and the heather, or the shipyards and the herring, of the little fishing village in Northern Scotland where he was born.<sup>148</sup>

#### IV. Cultural roots

The FWP and Ellis Island testimonies show that British emigrants retained distinctive traits of their native culture in America, which helped them to preserve a sense of belonging to their national community. The evidence offered by the interviews on this topic would certainly have been more abundant if the fieldworkers had specifically investigated this aspect of British immigrants' experience.<sup>149</sup> Still, the examples of cultural retention are various and diverse, numerous enough for us to reach general conclusions on the subject. Once again, the preservation of Old Country culture seems to be more marked in (young) adult emigrants, though several instances of child emigrants who preserved distinctively English, Scottish or Welsh cultural practices are also to be found, as we shall see below.

Britons kept their culture alive in the United States, both within the domestic sphere and publicly. In this regard, Richard Alba speaks of the *content* of ethnic identity, of 'behavioural and experiential expressions of identity, its crystallization into concrete patterns of action and relationship.'<sup>150</sup> Corresponding with friends and relatives in Britain, returning home for a visit and choosing not to become an American citizen are "concrete effects" of national identity feelings on the immigrants' behaviour. The preservation of cultural identity also found expression in actions which characterized the immigrants' life such as decorating one's home with images reminiscent of one's

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<sup>148</sup> Mr. MacCurrie, FWP, 20 January 1939 interview, fieldworker's notes.

<sup>149</sup> The generic character of the FWP life histories has been pointed out more than once. As to the Ellis Island interviews, no specific section of the questionnaire is devoted to the immigrants' cultural activities in America, let alone to the retention of elements of the original culture. There is only one question about leisure time – 'Describe what you did for entertainment' – which elicit the informants' comments about this topic.

<sup>150</sup> Richard D. Alba, *Ethnic Identity. The Transformation of White America* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990), 75. Alba focuses on the second and later-generation immigrants, but the issue of cultural and identity retention also concerns foreign-born immigrants in their new land of adoption.

native country, eating ethnic foods, observing traditional holidays, participating in ethnic cultural events, joining ethnic associations, attending ethnic churches as well as using one's mother tongue (in the case of English speakers, it is not the use of a *foreign* language that we should look for, but the retention of one's specific variant of English), all actions which 'give meaning to an otherwise abstract assertion of ethnic identity and breathe life into ethnicity as a social form.'<sup>151</sup>

Traces of British immigrants' native culture could be detected in some of the informants' home decorations. For example, Mr Evan Morris Jones, a native of North Wales, had a painting of magnificent Caernarfon Castle gracing his living room,<sup>152</sup> and Mary Dunn had hung a portrait of Robert Burns in her home, as we shall see. Twenty-eight years after emigration, Mrs Oliver's favourite dish remained haggis – 'I could do wi' some haggis noo', she unabashedly declared during the interview (notice her heavy Scottish accent, which the fieldworker tries to reproduce). Haggis was not the only traditional food Mrs Oliver cooked and enjoyed, since she was able to give the interviewer the recipes of various Scottish dishes, including "Scotch broth" and "Scotch oatcakes."<sup>153</sup> Perhaps this is unsurprising, as the informant was 33 years old when she left Scotland, an age at which acquired eating, and other kind of, habits are difficult to change. At the time of interview, in 1939, Mrs Larson's English cultural identity also seemed to be still quite marked (she had left Kent in 1917, when she was 16). She recalled some typical English sayings and songs and mentioned English foods and customs, such as Boxing Day's celebrations, Yorkshire pudding and stewed steak. And she still enjoyed tea at four o'clock as in the Old Country.<sup>154</sup> Jack Carnegie's father was fully involved in a typically Scottish (as well as English, admittedly, but certainly not American) sports activity. In fact, he was the trainer of a Scottish football team called the Caledonians, and young Jack apparently also played football frequently in Paterson, where the Carnegies lived. The quintessential Scottishness of the informant's father is shown by the fact he kept the special ointment with which he rubbed the players' muscles in a whisky bottle!<sup>155</sup>

Isabella Deeks, aged 9 when she arrived from Glasgow, recalls that her family preserved only one important tradition of Scottish culture, which she also maintained,

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>152</sup> Evan Jones, FWP, 30 August interview, fieldworker's notes.

<sup>153</sup> Mrs Oliver, FWP, 2-3.

<sup>154</sup> Mrs Larson, FWP, 2-7.

<sup>155</sup> Jack Carnegie, EI, 18-19.

namely the celebration of Hogmanay and the custom of ‘first-footing’ connected with it. In Scottish folklore, the *first-foot* is the first person that crosses the threshold of a home on New Year’s Day. The first-foot is a bringer of good fortune for the coming year and is supposed to bear gifts such as a coin, bread, coal or a drink (usually whisky):

[T]he only thing I say that we kept up traditionally, we always kept our holiday. You know, the Scottish holiday and, which, of course, was New Year’s. New Year’s is five hours earlier than America. And so always, at seven o’clock at night we would always say, “Happy New Year.” And I still do the First Footin’. In Scotland, after the 12 o’clock you first footed, the person in your house after 12 o’clock was supposed to bring you something like bread or, or, or coal or something they had to bring you. [...] So I still had that tradition here. Whoever comes into my house after midnight has to give me something. [...] And we always, at midnight here, we always drink to ourselves here and wish each other a happy New Year. But at seven o’clock at night we usually drink to them in Scotland.<sup>156</sup>

This last example demonstrates that immigrants preserved traditions and customs *selectively*. Some maintained only a few of them, which translated into an *occasional* expression of ethnic identity, while others activated their national cultural identity much more frequently or even on a daily basis. In other words, some immigrants felt and lived their ethnicity more intensely than others. This is the case with Scottish informant Mary Dunn (as well as of some Welsh immigrants, as we shall see below). Mary had left Stirling in 1923, when she was 18. Her testimony condenses many of the cultural expressions of Scottishness surfacing in other interviews, offering a clear example of an immigrant who maintained a strong sense of belonging to the mother country and manifested it frequently in more than one way. Indeed, the informant mentioned traditional cuisine, folk music and dancing, the use of national symbols for home decoration, the observance of national holidays and the joining of national clubs and associations. She also seemed to be quite homesick, so much so that, despite the fact that a sister-in-law was the only relative she had in Scotland, she took regular return trips to her native country:

[L]ast Saturday night we went to a dinner dance honoring Robert Burns, and that’s his picture up there on the wall. And we’re going to one next Wednesday night to honor Robert Burns who is the poet, Scottish poet who died very young. And then we dance all the Scottish dances and these things, you know. And I have oodles of Scottish records. When I get homesick I put them on and play them. (She laughs) I don’t really get homesick because I don’t have anybody at home now. Over there I have a sister-in-law, every two years I go back and visit. Oh, and I make all kind of Scottish pastry. I’m a real Scottish baker. Sorry I don’t have any here today. (They laugh) Oh yeah, I have a little bit of shortbread.<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> Isabella Deeks, EI, 24.

<sup>157</sup> Mary Dunn, EI, 26.

Agencies and institutions catering to the social and cultural needs of British immigrants, such as ethnic associations and clubs, could be found in America, especially in the urban centres that had witnessed a substantial influx of Britons. These agencies helped immigrants to preserve their national identity and sense of belonging in a foreign land. Cultural events, such as ethnic festivals, performed a similar function. The FWP and Ellis Island oral histories offer various examples of this collective dimension of Britons' life in America, in particular with regard to Scottish and Welsh immigrants.

One of the most important activities that Welsh associations performed in the United States was the organization of the Welsh cultural event par excellence, the *eisteddfod*. As already noted, the *eisteddfod* was a festival in which people competed for prizes in singing, writing and reciting, often in the Welsh language (though gradually less so in the twentieth century). The FWP fieldworkers conducted several brief interviews with Welsh immigrants to Vermont on this theme. These accounts suggest that, if they had pursued the subject, fieldworkers could have gained much more information about the occurrence of ethnic events wherever the presence British immigrants was significant. Mrs Whittington – who arrived in America in 1889 when she was 6 – claimed that *eisteddfods* had taken place in Vermont since at least 1860, and were still being organized at the time of interview (in 1938). She regularly participated in Poultney's festivals, acting as adjudicator in various contests.<sup>158</sup> She also mentioned the important chorus, solo singer and recitation contests that competitors entered during an *eisteddfod*. Some of the recitations, she emphasized, were delivered in Welsh, and the 1929 programme included a prize for writing poems in the Welsh language. In America, Mrs Whittington specified, prizes were usually given in cash, though sometimes a "chair" was awarded, while in Wales a prize normally consisted in a "chair."<sup>159</sup> As Mrs Roberts clarified, 'they call it "seating the bard" when they award a poet the chair.'<sup>160</sup>

William Hughes mentioned *eisteddfods* taking place in Fair Haven, a Vermont town where, as in Poultney, a substantial community of Welsh slate quarrymen lived. He recalled that both money and chairs were given as prizes to the winners of the various competitions and that, on these occasions, bands of very gifted musicians played, such

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<sup>158</sup> Mrs Whittington, FWP, fieldworker's notes, Form A.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, 2-3.

<sup>160</sup> Ellen Roberts, FWP, 2.

as the Fair Haven and the South Poultney Welsh bands.<sup>161</sup> Interestingly, Hughes points out that the music played in American eisteddfods ‘came by mail from Wales.’<sup>162</sup> Activities meant to preserve their common cultural heritage evidently helped Welsh people on both sides of the Atlantic to keep in contact. Hughes’s testimony also seems to reveal that the homeland’s practices functioned as a model in cultural matters, in other words that Welsh immigrants used the mother country as a touchstone when they publicly expressed their cultural identity in America. In this connection it is also significant that, as Mrs Whittington remembers, every year Welsh immigrants choruses went to Wales to compete in the National Eisteddfod there.<sup>163</sup> The Welsh cultural connection had, therefore, a clear transatlantic dimension. The mother country usually set the standards for the Welsh community abroad and provided models to imitate. There were exceptions, though. For example, the fame of John William Jones, an immigrant bard who composed poems in Welsh, extended to the mother country.<sup>164</sup>

According to Mrs Roberts, eisteddfods lasting a whole day were quite momentous, involving about 60 singers and a total of 200 contestants.<sup>165</sup> She also recalls having attended such events in other states, in particular in Granville, New York.<sup>166</sup> Similarly, the quotation from Mrs Whittington’s interview at the opening of this chapter shows that the fostering of Welsh culture was not a local matter. In fact, she affirms that people from Pennsylvania participated in Vermont’s eisteddfods and vice versa, and also mentions the large festivals organized in Granville. These cultural networks made it possible for first and later-generation Welsh immigrants to preserve their cultural heritage, particularly in states where the presence of the Welsh was sizeable, as was the case with Vermont, New York and Pennsylvania.

The FWP testimonies portray eisteddfods as successful ventures, with widespread public participation and high quality performances. In short, the idea they convey is that a thriving Welsh culture existed in the area where they took place. Yet, interestingly, some of the informants’ statements cast doubt on this picture. Seth Roberts, for example, affirms that there had not been a major eisteddfod for some time in Vermont, intimating that such events were on the wane and revealing perhaps that the representation offered by other interviewees was coloured by a feeling of nostalgia and

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<sup>161</sup> William Hughes, FWP, 2.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>163</sup> Mrs Whittington, FWP, 3.

<sup>164</sup> Ellen Roberts, FWP, 1.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid., 3.



ethnic pride.<sup>167</sup> Actually, the last important eisteddfod that FWP informants recalled was the one which took place in 1929, about ten years before the interviews were conducted. Mrs Whittington also admitted that there had not been a large eisteddfod since then, and Ellen Roberts explains that the programme of the 1937 Christmas event was limited to one evening, and mostly made up of music performances. All of this, possibly, was a sign of cultural decline or only a consequence of the financial constraints and sombre mood stemming from the Great Depression.<sup>168</sup>

Though eisteddfods were obviously organized by Welsh ethnic associations, these are hardly mentioned or discussed explicitly by informants. An exception comes from Mrs Whittington's interview, from which we also learn that she was a member of the Rebecca Lodge, a Welsh-American female order.<sup>169</sup> This shows that both religious and lay institutions enabled Welsh immigrants to preserve their ethnic loyalty in America as late as the 1930s, though they may have been in decline by then. Scottish associations and clubs are mentioned more frequently in the sources. Mrs Oliver, for instance, remembers a Caledonia Club in Michigan (where she emigrated with her husband in 1910) which celebrated the traditional holidays of the Scottish calendar, offering an occasion for socialization and identity reaffirmation to the Scots living in that area. Mrs Oliver took an active part in the events organized by the club, putting her culinary capabilities at the service of her compatriots: 'I mind well hoo I made th' haggises for th' Caledonia Club there fur th' Haggis Nicht, that's Robbie Burns's nicht, the twenty-feeth o' January. Aye, they all said there'd been no sech haggises there before.'<sup>170</sup>

Dancing is mentioned as one of the main recreational activities Scottish emigrants performed in ethnic associations. Jack Carnegie's mother, for example, belonged to the Caledonia Club and the Daughters of Scotia in Paterson, New Jersey, where she liked to dance, in particular the Irish jig.<sup>171</sup> John Daly remembers that his young sister was a champion sword dancer. Though the informant does not specify it, she presumably displayed her ability during cultural events organized by Scottish immigrants' associations, since dancing was normally done in public.<sup>172</sup> However, not all children embraced enthusiastically such expressions of traditional prowess in national costumes. Some felt embarrassed and resented their parents' imposition, thus revealing the

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<sup>167</sup> Seth Roberts, FWP, 2.

<sup>168</sup> Mrs Whittington, FWP, 1; Ellen Roberts, FWP, 2.

<sup>169</sup> Mrs Whittington, FWP, fieldworker's notes, Form B.

<sup>170</sup> Mrs Oliver, FWP, 1.

<sup>171</sup> Jack Carnegie, EI, 7.

<sup>172</sup> John Daly, EI, 23.

possible divide between the older and the younger immigrant generation with regard to cultural retention. In fact, Allan Gunn's mother insisted that her son and daughter took Scottish dancing lessons (which indicates that such lessons were available for the Scottish immigrant community). Yet Allan was far from eager to learn and perform in public the Old Country's time-honoured steps, as his reaction makes clear:

So we had to have Scottish dancing, and, of course [...] And we'd do the sword dance, single sword, double sword dance, Highland Fling, Sailor's Hornpipe. And, of course, any time the church had some kind of function going on we were invited to dance, and I hated it. And we had our kilts, of course. And the only way I could get even and show my disapproval, when we did the double sword dance, I would walk off the stage and let my sister pick up the swords [...].<sup>173</sup>

Most Britons were Protestants, and this aspect of their culture may not have distinguished them significantly from mainstream Americans. Actually, religion is often pointed out as one of the main elements of cultural similarity between Americans and Britons, who are said not to have established numerous and long-lasting religious organizations as non-Protestant ethnic groups did. Truly, Berthoff observes that '[s]ince American sects rested on the same doctrinal and ecclesiastical foundations as British churches and chapels, immigrants were likely to find their particular denominations wherever they settled.'<sup>174</sup> However, he also points out that, in places where Britons did not find their denominations or where they constituted the majority of the congregation, they created their own churches. In fact, '[w]herever they went, Scots were bound to maintain their kirk no matter whether the minister's clerical robes and the modes of worship surprised American Presbyterians.' Furthermore, 'for immigrants who had known the valleys of Wales, their own chapels, whatever the language used, were always the strongest institutional link with the dearly remembered land of their fathers.'<sup>175</sup> "Ethnically flavoured" churches, therefore, were a tangible reality for many British immigrants in America, especially Scottish and Welsh.

The sources analyzed here make no mention of English or Scottish churches. Perhaps this is due to the fact that the topic was not investigated closely. In this connection it is worth noting that Welsh churches are often mentioned in relation to the use of the Welsh language in America, though the subject of devotion often crops up "naturally" in the interviews with Welsh immigrants, as an obvious element of their distinctive culture (connected in turn to the use of the Welsh language). Indeed, various testimonies

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<sup>173</sup> Allan Gunn, EI, 39.

<sup>174</sup> Berthoff, *British Immigrants*, 154.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, 157, 161.

show that religion was an important aspect of Welsh culture that was carried over to the United States. Linguistic reasons, rather than a significant difference in religious creed and practices with the majority of Americans, lay behind the diffusion of Welsh churches in the United States. In fact, many Welsh immigrants to the U.S. were Welsh speakers or bilingual, and they were used to religious ceremonies conducted in Welsh. In the twentieth century this was especially the case with people coming from the northern region of the country, who are overrepresented in the Ellis Island Oral History Project interviews. The regional bias of the Ellis Island corpus, therefore, risks overemphasizing the role played by ethnic churches in the life of Welsh immigrants. The interviews reveal that many Welsh immigrants attended and were active members of their own churches. This is the case, for example, with Mrs Whittington as well as Ellen Roberts and her daughter.<sup>176</sup> According to Kyffin Williams, in Utica Welsh immigrants attended their own churches because, there, they could hear sermons in the Welsh language delivered by Welsh clergymen.<sup>177</sup> Attending one's own ethnic church had something to do with more than just religiosity. Thomas Powell's father, in fact, went to the Welsh church in Utica not only to hear sermons in Welsh but also to socialize with his countrymen. This made him feel as if he was still at home:

There was a Welsh church there, and there were Welsh people, and they had Welsh sermons both morning and night here. And we would converse with these people that came from Wales. Some of them he knew, and some of them he found came from a village close by. I mean, it meant a lot to get in your own family, like.<sup>178</sup>

Interestingly, Robert Reese recalls that, in the 1920s, Utica's Welsh churches held a service in Welsh in the morning and one in English at night.<sup>179</sup> This shows that, by this period, Welsh communities in America, including those made up chiefly of people from North Wales and their descendants, could not continue employing exclusively the Welsh language even in a traditional context such as religious ceremonies if they wanted to cater to the needs of the second and later-generation immigrants.

Love for music (and singing) was another typical element of Welsh culture – which found its primary expression in religious ceremonies and ethnic events such as the eisteddfod, as we have seen – that emigrants from Wales retained and nurtured in

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<sup>176</sup> Mrs Whittington, FWP, fieldworker's notes, Form B; Ellen Roberts, FWP, fieldworker's notes, Form B.

<sup>177</sup> Kyffin Williams, EI, 23-24.

<sup>178</sup> Thomas Powell, EI, 34.

<sup>179</sup> Robert Reese, EI, 43.

America. Robert Reese sang in the choir of the Welsh church he attended,<sup>180</sup> while Evan Jones possessed a song book featuring a number of popular songs meant to be used by Welsh-Americans in Utica.<sup>181</sup> Jones's children were talented musicians, and one of his sons was also studying to become a minister (obviously, music and religion were essential aspects of Welsh national identity that the informant's family cultivated).<sup>182</sup> Finally, in the notes introducing his interview with Mrs Roberts, FWP fieldworker C.F. Derven wrote: 'As in the majority of Welsh-American homes, where music is very popular, there is a piano with a book of Welsh songs visible upon the rack.'<sup>183</sup>

On the whole, the FWP and Ellis Island testimonies confirm what historians generally acknowledge, namely that first-generation British adult immigrants retained many elements of their native culture and important aspects of their homeland's cultural practices. The foregoing also shows (once again, in accordance with the view of many scholars) that cultural retention – as embodied in the preservation of customs and practices and, even more so, in the creation of associations and attendance of ethnic institutions and cultural events – was stronger for Scottish and Welsh immigrants than for English newcomers. Indeed, Scottish dances, customs and traditional holidays, as well as Welsh ethnic churches and unique events such as the eisteddfod, represented elements of marked cultural distinctiveness that many immigrants from Scotland and Wales maintained in America.

Cultural retention seems to have been decidedly weaker, though by no means absent, in the case of people who emigrated as children. Indeed, the evidence provided by the testimonies in this regard is mixed. As we have seen above, the interviews offer various examples of child immigrants who preserved important aspects of the Old Country's culture (predictably, this applies especially to Scottish and Welsh newcomers). Similarly, Thomas Powell, despite having emigrated at the age of eight, sang in Welsh choruses in Utica, listened to Welsh music at home, and in old age was still able to carry on a conversation in Welsh.<sup>184</sup> By contrast, in a number of cases the testimonies reveal that child immigrants did not preserve significant traits of their native culture. Cyril Cheeseman – who arrived in America when he was 7, only one year younger than

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<sup>180</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>181</sup> Evan Jones, FWP, September interview, 1.

<sup>182</sup> Evan Jones, FWP, August interview, fieldworker's notes.

<sup>183</sup> Ellen Roberts, FWP, fieldworker's notes.

<sup>184</sup> Thomas Powell, EI, 38.

Thomas Powell – provides a clear instance of the “identity divide” that might develop between child and adult emigrants. Cyril definitely looked at his relatives as foreigners: ‘I always thought they were kind of weird because I grew up as an American boy, you know, and here my family was all British. They all had a British accent and mannerisms you know, and – but here I was different.’<sup>185</sup> William McGuire, who was the same age as Cyril Cheeseman when he reached America, also plainly admitted he had not preserved any habits or customs from his own Scottish background.<sup>186</sup> Finally, Archibald Webster moved from England as a three-year-old child to Reading, PA, where, apparently, there was no association, lodge or other institution devoted to the maintenance of the Old Country’s cultural identity. The informant also recalls that his parents ‘never held to the Old Country business,’ possibly because they did not think it was important to transmit a specific ethnic identity to the next generation.<sup>187</sup> This last example shows that the role of one’s family, above all of one’s parents, could be crucial in the retention of traits of the original culture on the part of child emigrants. It also reveals that various factors, such as the lack of meeting places for people of one’s own nationality in the town where one lived, could make it more difficult for immigrants – in particular for children, due to their weaker ties with the homeland – to cultivate elements of their cultural identity.<sup>188</sup>

## V. Mother country tongue

As Michael R. Olneck observes, along with symbols, rituals, myths, common history and a shared vernacular culture, language is one of the most important aspects of

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<sup>185</sup> Cyril Cheeseman, EI, 5.

<sup>186</sup> William McGuire, EI, 28.

<sup>187</sup> Archibald Webster, EI, 27-28.

<sup>188</sup> The FWP project and Ellis Island interviews also shed some light on the reception of Old Country ways by second-generation British immigrants, yet the evidence they supply is insufficient to draw any safe conclusions. For what is worth, both examples of retention and abandonment of Old Country customs can be found. As we have seen above, Mrs Oliver’s attachment to her native Scotland was evident from the fact that she prepared and relished traditional Scottish food. Yet her words also enable us to glimpse the unreceptive attitude that some second-generation immigrants might have had towards their parents’ culture: ‘M’ bairns are no wantin’ them things. Th’ er no good enou’ fer them. They’re all fer th’ things they have in this counthry th’ noo.’ (Mrs Oliver, FWP, 2). By contrast, Mrs Roberts’s daughter was deeply involved in various Welsh organizations and institutions, especially the Welsh church. In fact, she participated in many eisteddfods and won several prizes (Ellen Roberts, FWP, fieldworker’s notes, Form B). Finally, Mr “B.”’s wife was very knowledgeable about Yorkshire, the region her parents came from (Mr “B”, FWP, 2), and the fact that she had married a first-generation immigrant from Newcastle is further proof of her connection with her English origins.

national identity.<sup>189</sup> Indeed, it is a crucial element to be considered when discussing the issues of immigrants' identity and cultural retention. This also applies to immigrants from Great Britain, though in their case the question has to be tackled from a different perspective. In fact, for them language preservation meant keeping their accent and other specific characteristics of their variant of English (as distinguished from the variant of English spoken in America), rather than using a foreign idiom. Below we shall focus on the retention of two distinctive aspects of British immigrants' speech, namely accent and lexicon, on which the FWP and Ellis Island oral histories supply adequate evidence.

Yet, first of all, attention will be turned to a group of British immigrants who did actually speak a non-English language. As we have already noted, many of the Welsh immigrants interviewed by both FWP and Ellis Island researchers were Welsh speakers or bilingual (they came from North Wales, where Welsh continued to be spoken well into the twentieth century). Immigrants who were monolingual or virtually monolingual in Welsh were rare in the twentieth century, but they had not disappeared entirely. Actually, Thomas Powell – who moved to America with his family in 1913 – recalls that his mother had only a working knowledge of English and used Welsh at home with her children. Indeed, Thomas himself had to learn English in America. Yet, unlike his mother, he learned it quickly by interacting with his peers at school.<sup>190</sup>

Adult emigrants continued using Welsh in America, at least on certain occasions (at church, for example). Moreover, the ability to read, speak, and sometimes write in this language was maintained by a significant number of those who arrived as children, and sometimes was transmitted to second-generation immigrants. This means that many Welsh immigrants kept their language alive not only as a language of devotion and as a means of cultural expression (through the organization of events such as the *eisteddfods*), but also as a means of personal communication within their families. For instance, Mrs Whittington had a good command of Welsh, despite having moved to America when she was only 5 years old.<sup>191</sup> Likewise, as we have seen above (cf. note 187), Mrs Roberts's daughter won many prizes in *eisteddfods*' competitions. Finally, Seth Roberts, another second-generation immigrant, had a sound knowledge of Welsh

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<sup>189</sup> Olneck, "Assimilation and American National Identity," 202.

<sup>190</sup> Thomas Powell, EI, 31.

<sup>191</sup> Mrs Whittington, FWP, fieldworker's notes, Form B.

and subscribed to several Welsh-American publications, including the important and long-lived newspaper *Y Drych*.<sup>192</sup>

However, as we have already pointed out, the use of Welsh was dwindling in the first decades of the twentieth century. Among the reasons for this was that bilingual Welsh speakers did not always teach their native tongue to their children and members of the American-born generation were not always willing to learn it. Mr Evan Jones's statement – 'most of the people who were born in Wales and came to this country speak Welsh and have taught their children to speak it' – sounds too optimistic.<sup>193</sup> The fact that all the members of the informant's family were able to speak Welsh perhaps explains his view of the matter.<sup>194</sup> Predictably, not all child or second-generation Welsh immigrants were as proficient as Mrs Roberts's daughter or Seth Roberts. William Hughes's daughter, for instance, did not speak much Welsh.<sup>195</sup> Moreover, as Robert Williams explains in plain words, the fact that Welsh-speaking immigrants attempted to keep their language alive in America could cause friction with the younger generation, which felt a weaker attachment to their homeland, faced the prejudice of their peers, and were under considerable pressure to Americanize. In fact, the informant's parents

insisted on having Welsh in the home but they [the children] had to go to school. And then in, in the church it was Welsh services they had. Then, when the kids went to school, they were looked upon, 'Oh, he's a foreigner. He can't talk English.' So what do the kids do. They made an effort to learn English. And that's, and the old timers, they tried to keep the Welsh in, everything Welsh. They made a mistake there.<sup>196</sup>

The use of Welsh in America commonly followed a downward trajectory: the first-generation immigrants spoke Welsh and often made an effort to transmit it to their children; these did not normally use it as a language of everyday communication but only on specific occasions; finally, members of the third generation rarely preserved even a basic competence in the Welsh language. Yet, as the above quotation shows, this downward process could only take one generation if immigrants were very young when they arrived in America. Indeed, the children of Robert Williams, who was 10 at the time of emigration, apparently lacked all knowledge of their parents' native tongue.<sup>197</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> Seth Roberts, FWP, 1.

<sup>193</sup> Evan Jones, FWP, August 1938 interview, 1.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, fieldworker's notes, Form B.

<sup>195</sup> William Hughes, FWP, 3.

<sup>196</sup> Robert Williams, EI, 49.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

If Welsh was in decline but still very much alive in the first decades of the twentieth century, this was not the case when the Ellis Island oral history project was carried out. Kyffin Williams left North Wales for America in 1914, at 19 years of age. At the time of interview (in 1993) he recited prayers in Welsh at people's funerals since no minister was able to do that in Utica anymore.<sup>198</sup> This example clearly shows the dramatic shrinking of the Welsh-speaking community in an area of the United States that had witnessed a significant influx of Welsh immigrants well into the twentieth century.

Though the mother tongue of most British newcomers was English, they spoke differently from Americans, pronouncing words "strangely" and using terms and expressions that were unfamiliar in the United States. People who emigrated as children had an accent when they arrived, of course, but were able to change it in a relatively short time. Indeed, modifying one's way of speaking quickly and thoroughly is something only very young individuals are normally capable of doing. While British immigrants who arrived as children came to acquire an American accent, those who emigrated as adults continued sounding foreign, though some might have somewhat changed their way of speaking over time. Therefore, it is normally only possible to talk about accent retention with regard to adult emigrants.<sup>199</sup>

When dealing with the FWP informants' accent it is necessary to rely on transcriptions – these, as we have seen, sometimes try to render (more or less clumsily) the interviewees' pronunciation – or on the fieldworkers' notes. By contrast, audio recordings enable us to actually hear the voices of the Ellis Island informants. Unfortunately, only a small number of these emigrated as adults, as has been noted, and thus their native accent can be heard in just a handful of cases.

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<sup>198</sup> Kyffin Williams, EI, 50.

<sup>199</sup> Of course, in Great Britain there are a variety of accents, and regional variations in the way people speak can be significant. Labels identifying different accents can multiply according to how specific one's phonological analysis needs to be. A general distinction is between English, Scottish and Welsh accents. Yet, by breaking down such geographical-political units, a large number of dialects can be identified (the fact that they may or may not be perceived as distinctly different is another matter, depending on where and by whom such dialects are heard). People who do not follow a Received Pronunciation model speak in a different way not only in Britain's three constituent nations, but also within such nations. In England, for instance, a Yorkshire, a Liverpudlian or a Kent accent, to name but a few, can be recognized, while in Scotland people from Glasgow, Fife or the Orkney Islands speak differently, though to untrained ears they may sound quite similar. In most cases, the sources utilized in this work allow only general accent distinctions, nor is it necessary for our purpose to conduct a detailed phonological analysis of the informants' speech. Indeed, what is important to note here is that they preserved an "Old Country accent" even a long time after emigration to America.



Most Ellis Island interviews were conducted, it is worth remembering, from the 1990s onwards. The fact that emigrants retained a distinctive accent at the time of interview, 60 or 70 years after departure, deserves to be emphasized. This is a definite sign of the immigrants' preservation of an important aspect of their original culture and identity. Abraham Silver, who left Liverpool in 1930 when he was 19, tells his story in a distinctively English accent. Unlike most Americans, for instance, he does not pronounce postvocalic 'r's, and there is no trace of nasalization in his speech.<sup>200</sup> The audio recording of Cristina Spratt's testimony provides another clear example of accent retention. Her intonation is immediately recognizable as Scottish, and her postvocalic "r"s can be heard distinctly, though they sound slightly softened, a bit less marked than they must have been when she left Glasgow in 1922 at 23 years of age. Spratt pronounces her "r"s in the way many Scots do – Scots who do not adopt a Received Pronunciation model will use an alveolar tap, indicated by the phonetic symbol /ɾ/, or a trill, /r/ –, which is quite different from the retroflexive "r" typical of American English. Another example of a sound characterizing Spratt's accent is her typically Scottish open pronunciation of /ɪ/, so that it sounds similar to /ɛ/ (the word "bridge", for instance, is pronounced /brɪdʒ/ in Standard English but /brɛdʒ/ in Scotland).<sup>201</sup>

Information on the way British immigrants talked can also be obtained, as noted, from the FWP life histories transcriptions. Mrs Oliver, who emigrated in 1910 when she was 33, is said to speak in a 'broad Scotch dialect', which the fieldworker attempts to render: 'Aye, I've th' twa boys an' four gels. Ooh. The times we've had. I come awa' t' this country twenty-eight years past. We furrst wint t' Michigan where Rabert hed some o' his family t' come too.'<sup>202</sup> In the case of Andrew McCurrie the fieldworker is only willing (or able) to give a rough idea of the informant's accent: 'He recommended a balanced budget. Laid it all oot for them'; 'What the hell are you talking about?'<sup>203</sup> Half a century after emigration to Texas (he had left Edinburgh in 1884, at 27 years of age) William Whytock is also said to retain 'the Scottish accent & roll.'<sup>204</sup>

Scots were certainly not alone in preserving their marked accent (though this seems to have been reported more frequently, perhaps due to its peculiarity). For example, Mrs

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<sup>200</sup> Abraham Silver, EI, audio tape.

<sup>201</sup> Cristina Spratt, EI, audio tape.

<sup>202</sup> Mrs Oliver, FWP, 1.

<sup>203</sup> Andrew McCurrie, FWP, 3, 20 January interview.

<sup>204</sup> William Whytock, FWP, fieldworker's notes.

Larson (arrived from Kent when she was 16 in 1907) was a “rapid talker” who apparently preserved her way of speaking almost intact, so much so that, as the fieldworker’s preliminary notes specify, ‘some of her conversation is not readily understood and requires repeating. The English influence seems strong.’<sup>205</sup> Similarly, Mrs Glasson recalls that her English husband ‘never did call words like we do, and he never fell into our way of talking as long as he lived.’<sup>206</sup>

The Ellis Island interviewees do not appear to have overemphasized their accent (this is presumably also true about the FWP informants, though we cannot hear their actual voice). Of course, like other elements of linguistic communication (lexicon, for instance), accent can change according to circumstances. In other words, some immigrants may stress their different way to pronounce words or even assume an accent when in the presence of family or fellow countrymen, or in other particular situations. The Ellis Island interview setting does not seem to have been one of these. Though informants were taped as representatives of their ethnic group and may have been tempted to “act British”, it is very unlikely that they (consciously or unconsciously) modified their accent for the whole duration of the interview. Indeed, the adult immigrants taped by the Ellis Island researchers speak naturally, their recorded voice sounds genuine. Having an American-born interlocutor might have prompted them to emphasize their Britishness, but at the same time would have resulted in affectation, in an unnatural behaviour difficult to reconcile with a friendly face-to-face conversation. Moreover, when people with different regional backgrounds meet (in this case, British informants and American interviewers), ‘there is a tendency for their speech patterns to become more alike, or *converge*. This process, known as accommodation, can be observed in all aspects of language structure, but is especially noticeable in accents.’<sup>207</sup>

Before proceeding to analyse lexicon, it is worth noting that British immigrants’ peculiar accents was often the source of taunting in America. For instance, Joseph Delaney, who had left Glasgow at 19 years of age, was teased by his workmates and other people at his favourite haunt because of the way he talked.<sup>208</sup> Similarly, in Oxford, Nebraska, 9 year-old Thomas Allan was mocked by other children: ‘here at Oxford they were kidding me about my burr, and that’s one of the reasons why I got rid of it real

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<sup>205</sup> Mrs Larson, FWP, fieldworker’s notes.

<sup>206</sup> Mrs Glasson, FWP, 2.

<sup>207</sup> David Crystal, *The Cambridge Encyclopaedia of The English Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 298.

<sup>208</sup> Joseph Delaney, EI, 37.

fast, see.’<sup>209</sup> Indeed, as we shall see in more detail in the next section, British children had a hard time at school before they were able to modify their “funny” accents, which they did as quick as they could.

The FWP and Ellis Island interviews offer various examples of the informants’ employment of typically *British* English vocabulary, as distinguished from American English terms, as well as of British regional vocabulary variations – for example, “holiday” instead of “vacation” and the Scottish adjective “bonnie” respectively. “British English” (as well as “American English”, for that matter) is a general expression subsuming not only regional but also social and personal variations in the use of language. As with accent, there is no space here for a detailed linguistic analysis of the informants’ speech taking into account all possible lexicon variations. Nor is it necessary for our purpose to highlight social variations or personal idiosyncrasies. In fact, attention will only be paid to the immigrants’ use of vocabulary items that are heard in Britain but are clearly foreign to American ears, and whose employment is thus suggestive of cultural (in this case, specifically, linguistic) retention.<sup>210</sup>

Examples of vocabulary retention on the part of British adult immigrants are to be found in both the FWP and Ellis Island accounts. As we have seen above, Mrs Glasson’s husband had an accent (he ‘never fell into our way of talking’, his wife recalled), and was also “faithful” to English lexicon (he ‘never did call words like we do’). Likewise, not only did Mrs Oliver spoke with a distinctive Scottish brogue, as has been pointed out. She also employed characteristically Scottish terms, such as the noun “bairns” (“children”) and the verb “ken” (“to know”).<sup>211</sup> Joseph Delaney, another Scot, used the British English expressions “tram car” and “secondary school” in his account (rather than “streetcar” and “high school”),<sup>212</sup> while Englishman Henry Cohen, talking about his childhood days in London, remembered his mother giving him “sweets” (“candy” in American English) and “playing truant” with his brother one day they did not feel like going to school (“play hooky” is the usual American English expression).<sup>213</sup>

Yet the sources also show that adult immigrants accommodated American English vocabulary into their conversation. This means that, in terms of lexicon, their speech

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<sup>209</sup> Thomas Allan, EI, 18.

<sup>210</sup> For an introductory overview of British English regional variations (including pronunciation and vocabulary) see Crystal, *The Cambridge Encyclopaedia of The English Language*, 318-25 and 328-35.

<sup>211</sup> Mrs Oliver, FWP, 1-2.

<sup>212</sup> Joseph Delaney, EI, 5-6.

<sup>213</sup> Henry Cohen, EI, 20; 8.

resembled more that of child immigrants than it was the case with regard to accent. The result is an intermingling of Old and New Country vocabulary. Indeed, accent is much more difficult to change than lexicon to acquire for an adult speaker (when the amount of new words to be learnt is relatively small, as in the case of British English speakers moving to America). Accent can fade, but it usually leaves a stronger mark of “linguistic identity” in adult immigrants’ speech compared to vocabulary. For instance, though he emigrated at 18 years of age, Robert Reese used the term “streetcar” instead of “tram.”<sup>214</sup> In this case, it might be argued, his word choice may be explained by the fact that he was referring to an *American* means of transport (what he needed to take in Utica to reach his final destination). Yet this explanation would not work for Joseph Delaney’s opposite word choice, as we have seen above. Besides, Reese also called “soccer” (rather than “football”) one of his favourite childhood games, confirming the influence of American English on his speech.<sup>215</sup> More examples are provided by the testimonies of John Hammond and “Captain X”. The former employs typically American English expressions such as “I guess” and “dumb”, instead of “I think” and “stupid”, the latter the verb “visit with” rather than just “visit”.<sup>216</sup> Finally, Mr “B” calls England his own country but then uses the informal American English adjective “swell”, meaning “very good”.<sup>217</sup>

While only adult immigrants retained their original accent, traces of the Old Country’s lexicon (both standard British English and regional variations) are also detectable in the interviews with people who emigrated as children. In this case the use of Old Country lexicon could be ascribed to the surfacing of the informants’ childhood memories and/or to the fact that, in America, they were exposed to British English at home and possibly regularly met people from their own native country. This must have helped them not to forget, or perhaps even to learn, terms, idioms and sayings used in their homeland but not in the United States. For instance, John Daly, aged 6 when he left Scotland, employs the British English term “lorry”. Interestingly, he feels the need to “translate” it for the fieldworker by providing the American English equivalent of the term: ‘And they would just go around in these lorries, which was a truck [...]’.<sup>218</sup> More examples are provided in the testimony of Thomas Allan, who emigrated from

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<sup>214</sup> Robert Reese, EI, 34.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>216</sup> John Hammond, FWP, 3; “Captain X”, FWP, 4.

<sup>217</sup> Mr “B.”, FWP, 3.

<sup>218</sup> John Daly, EI, p. 3.

Tillicoultry at the age of 9. He addressed the interviewer as “lassie” and, recounting his detention at Ellis Island, he said he wanted to go back to “bonnie” Scotland.<sup>219</sup> Predictably, often child immigrants did not opt for British English terms when there was an alternative between British and American English words, not even when they talked about their childhood experiences in their native country. By growing up in America, in fact, they had radically modified their vocabulary along with their accent, and memories did not make old terms and expressions automatically surface. For example, Thomas Sargent, who left London when he was 8, mentioned “cookies” as one of the things he ate as a child in England.<sup>220</sup> In the interviews with child immigrants, it deserves to be noted, British and American English terms can be found in the same passage or even within the same sentence. This is the case with Thomas Allan, for instance, who recalled his recent ‘*vacation trip*’ to ‘*bonnie* Scotland.’<sup>221</sup>

Summing up, the interviews show that adult Welsh speakers continued using their native language in America and that at least some of their children preserved a good command of Welsh, the employment of which was not exclusively limited to specific occasions such as *eisteddfods*. With regard to English speakers, the FWP and Ellis Island oral histories demonstrate that adult British immigrants retained their peculiar accents even many decades after emigration, and that they also employed British words and expressions. Apparently, immigrants who arrived as children also knew many Old Country terms, which they could decide to use or which surfaced almost unconsciously in specific contexts or circumstances. In this connection it is worth noting that adult, and even more so child, immigrants probably employed British terms more frequently in social contexts where they knew this would be possible or appropriate – as in the presence of other Britons or during an oral history project interview focusing on their original national identity and eliciting memories of their homeland – than in their everyday interaction with American-born people. In fact, the informants may have “slipped in” a number of British words and expressions during the interview (a much easier and more natural thing to do than changing an accent) which they would not have used in a different social context. Using Old Country vocabulary might have thus been a way of reaffirming or proving one’s identity, or meeting the supposed expectations of the fieldworkers. Only comparative linguistic analysis, which is outside the scope of

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<sup>219</sup> Thomas Allan, EI, 25, June 2001 interview; 4, July 1984 interview.

<sup>220</sup> Thomas Sargent, EI, p. 10.

<sup>221</sup> Thomas Allan, EI, 6, July 1984 interview, emphasis added.

this study, would enable us to verify this hypothesis. In any case, the evidence offered by the interviews demonstrate that, at the very least, in certain circumstances British immigrants activated their native country distinctive vocabulary. Along with the preservation of their accent, this is a further sign of language, and more generally cultural, retention.

## **VI. Foreign and different**

Various examples in the Ellis Island interviews reveal that Britons considered themselves to be clearly advantaged in the U.S. compared with other immigrants, especially because they shared a common language with Americans. As we have seen in Chapter 4, some of the informants portrayed their passage through Ellis Island as a quicker and easier affair as against the ordeal that awaited “real foreigners.” They explained the difference mainly with the fact that they spoke English and (consequently?) were treated more sympathetically by the immigration centre’s officials. Harry Norbury’s and Donald Roberts’s testimonies provide further evidence that British immigrants viewed their knowledge of English as a factor that made “special immigrants” of them. The former saw himself and his wife as privileged immigrants since they did not need to learn English, the latter interestingly defined himself as only a “stranger”, not a “real foreigner” like those who lacked command of the language spoken in America.<sup>222</sup>

Since Britons regarded the absence of a language barrier as a key element of cultural similarity with Americans that would greatly facilitate integration into the New World, it seems reasonable to suppose that many of them imagined they would not be treated in the same way as other immigrants in the U.S. Reality, though, often did not match their expectations. Indeed, both children and adults had to face an inescapable truth in America: they came from a different world and were the bearers of a different culture, they were dressed differently and, as we have seen, sounded different too. In other words, they were *foreigners* and, as such, subjected to the gaze of natives.

The Ellis Island interviews provide substantial evidence of the prejudice young British newcomers confronted, especially, though not exclusively, at school. Yet, it needs to be stressed that not everybody had the same experiences. Allan Gunn, for

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<sup>222</sup> Harry Norbury, EI, 15; Donald Roberts, EI, 11.

example, does not recall encountering any particular problem at school and describes his process of integration as relatively smooth: ‘I finally started to make friends, my sister started to make friends, and we became Americanized.’<sup>223</sup>

British children’s accent (or foreign tongue, in the case of Welsh speakers), along with the way they dressed or the simple fact that they were “greenhorns”, often met with an adverse response from their peers, Americans as well as other immigrants. As Thomas Allan cogently puts it: ‘We were oddities boy. I tell ya, I was the most beat up kid you ever saw.’<sup>224</sup> Prejudice could translate into fighting, “simple” verbal abuse or teasing. Sidney Pike, for example, recalled being made fun of because of his ‘broad British accent’, by which expression he meant *English* accent (he was from Surrey).<sup>225</sup> Thomas Powell was put in first grade because he did not know English. This made him an even easier target of derision. Certainly, what he was subjected to was more than merely teasing. Indeed, he recalls being “rescued” by two Welsh boys, showing that ethnic solidarity brought advantages even to school kids:

And there were two boys that came up to me and they spoke Welsh. Well, that was something from heaven. See, because I didn’t speak English then. And I got to talking with them, and so they, there was one kid that was always after me. So one of these two boys, one of the boys, was a pretty good-sized kid, and we went up to the fellow and said, “Look, lay off of him.” And so they never bothered me after that.<sup>226</sup>

Children adopted two essential strategies to cope with prejudice: to defend themselves as best as they could and to adapt to the new environment as rapidly as possible. Thomas Allan, for instance, changed his Scottish accent quickly to avoid taunting, and beating, as we have seen above.<sup>227</sup> Likewise, Lillian Hopkins, aged nine when she arrived from Glasgow in 1925, was mocked by other children. As a result, she recalls, it ‘wasn’t very long till I got rid of that brogue so they wouldn’t know.’<sup>228</sup> Patrick Peak, 9 years old when he arrived from Glasgow, was bullied for years – truly, he said he did not remember the other children ever stopping picking on him. His Scottish brogue and Catholic faith may have fuelled prejudice along with, perhaps, the fact that he played the fiddle (a badge of unmanliness in the eyes of street brats?). Indeed, the other children’s taunting was so exasperating that once, on his way to a

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<sup>223</sup> Allan Gunn, EI, 36.

<sup>224</sup> Thomas Allan, EI, June 2001 interview, 17.

<sup>225</sup> Sidney Pike, EI, 14.

<sup>226</sup> Thomas Powell, EI, 33.

<sup>227</sup> Thomas Allan, EI 18.

<sup>228</sup> Lillian Hopkins, EI, audio tape (no transcription of this interview is available).

music lesson, Patrick smashed his fiddle on the head of a child who was annoying him.<sup>229</sup> Interestingly, this case shows that children could be the victims of prejudice for a long time, not just for a relatively short period after arrival.

Violence, again, was apparently the only way in which Donald Roberts could put an end to ethnic bigotry. The way Donald and his brother were dressed triggered the attacks of other children in the neighbourhood. Notice the expressions used by the informant to highlight how different he and his brother looked from the other kids: ‘And, now here we were, strangers in a strange land. Uh we were dressed like British kids with short pants, rosy cheeks, and we must have stood out *like a sore thumb*. Because it didn’t take very long, a few weeks, before kids used to gang up on us and try to beat us up because we were *outcasts*, you know.’<sup>230</sup> The attacks they suffered were so frequent that their father, who used to box in the army, taught them the tricks of the trade. Eventually, the informant remembers, ‘we gave as much as we got and after a while we were left alone.’<sup>231</sup> Luckily, British children did not always have to face physical assault, though they had all the same to go through typical greenhorn humiliations. ‘Nobody beat me up’, Ken Johnson remembered, yet he was mocked for both his accent and clothes: ‘I was used to wearing little shorts, and most kids here wore slacks, you know. And I got ridiculed a little bit. You know, the British boy, and all that stuff, see.’<sup>232</sup>

There could be reasons other than accent or clothes why Britons were taunted, for example the fact that they were natives of the ex-mother country, from whose yoke Americans had liberated themselves. This is the case with Thomas Sargent, who also stood out for the way he spoke and the clothes he wore (namely, his Eton cap and short pants). Though the mocking did not last long (perhaps because the informant readily adapted to a new way of dressing and talking?), the informant had a hard life at the beginning: ‘And recess came and, of course, all the kids said, “Who won the Revolutionary War?” Well, I didn’t even know what the Revolutionary War was, because they didn’t teach that in England (he laughs). And so I learned to fight at that time.’<sup>233</sup>

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<sup>229</sup> Patrick Peak, EI, 14.

<sup>230</sup> Donald Roberts, EI, 11, emphasis added.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>232</sup> Ken Johnson, EI, 27.

<sup>233</sup> Thomas Sargent, EI, 31.



Ethnic tensions existing in Britain could “transplant” to America. One day, for instance, Robert Williams was attacked in school by an English boy whose battlecry was ‘Get that Welshman!’ A quite violent fight ensued:

And I remember when we got into contact, I really got mad. And I happened to see a stick on the ground, you know. And I got a chance to pick up that stick. And, boy, I everlasting hit him. And I remember hitting him on the side of the head, you know. I thought sure I took his ear off. And then the blood, the blood came down his face and, wow, I was scared, you know.<sup>234</sup>

The FWP and Ellis Island oral histories also supply tangible evidence of the prejudice encountered by British adult emigrants. Sometimes they were “only” the victims of teasing or mockery. Thomas Sargent’s mother, for instance, resented being laughed at while shopping because of the British expressions she employed, such as “beetroots” instead of the American English term “beets”, or “joint of lamb” rather than “leg of lamb.”<sup>235</sup> Apparently, therefore, not only Britons’ accent but also the words they used could make them the object of ridicule. “Captain X” remembers being called a “limey”<sup>236</sup> by an American sailor when he was working as an assistant cook on a ship,<sup>237</sup> and Arnold Ambler was subjected to the same treatment: ‘I got that, the term, limey. I got the term limey so many, many times.’<sup>238</sup> Indeed, even a mildly offensive term such as “limey” could become annoying when used insistently.

At other times biased attitudes seem to have been quite blatant. For example, though she was of English descent, Mrs “L.” affirmed she ‘was not fond of the English.’<sup>239</sup> Her family had English neighbours in Bridgeport, CT, with whom she evidently did not get along. Actually, she left home when her brother moved in with his English wife,<sup>240</sup> which incidentally shows that Mrs “L.”’s prejudice was not shared by all members of her family. This is not the only FWP and Ellis Island testimony which supplies evidence of glaring prejudice directed towards entire groups of British immigrants. For instance, Michael Donegal observed that, at least in the early years of mass migration, the population of Barre, VT, resented the presence of immigrants and looked at them as if

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<sup>234</sup> Robert Williams, EI, 42-43.

<sup>235</sup> Thomas Sargent, EI, 33.

<sup>236</sup> “Limey” is a term, often used derogatorily, identifying the English but originally referring to British sailors. This nickname is believed to derive from the Royal Navy and Merchant Navy practice of giving lime juice to British sailors in order to prevent scurvy.

<sup>237</sup> “Captain X”, FWP, 3.

<sup>238</sup> Arnold Ambler, EI, 25.

<sup>239</sup> Mrs “L.”, FWP, 1.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid., 5.

these were ‘an army of invaders.’ Donegal’s words make it clear that the locals’ attitudes extended to all immigrants, including Scottish newcomers. Yet, interestingly, the informant highlights the misbehaviour of other immigrants, in particular ‘the noisy fun and loudness of the Italians and Spaniards or the brawling of the Irish.’<sup>241</sup> This situation, apparently, improved over time, as native-born Americans and outsiders started to mingle more. The fact that the Scots could be targeted as unwelcome immigrants also emerges clearly from Miss Wheaton’s testimony, once again relating to the city of Barre. According to her, the first Scottish immigrants to arrive were ill-mannered and displayed a morally questionable behaviour (unfortunately, Miss Wheaton does not specify to which period she refers, though we know that a significant influx of Scots quarrymen into the town dated from the 1880s). The informant connects the Scots’ conduct to the fact that they had left their families at home and were living the unruly life of single men. In fact, her opinion of later immigrants is moderately positive, perhaps because the Scottish community in Barre gradually came to include an increasing number of families, and this made Miss Wheaton see Scots under a different light. This testimony shows that prejudice could be fostered by personal inclinations (in this case, the informant’s prudery is evident) but at the same time modified according to the nature of the migratory flow:

Those first Scotch were not skilled workers; that is, not in the same class with the artists and fine statue cutters who came a little later. I mean the Italians. The first Scotch did rude bulk work. They were an uncultured, ignorant group, and they had no respect for women. I can remember them standing three and four abreast in the streets – and the streets in those days were narrow. They’d make no move to allow a lady to pass. [...] There were questionable women that came into Barre at this period. Perhaps these Scotch were to be blamed. They were a bad lot. Most of the Scotch had left their wives and families in the old country until such time as they could afford to send for them. The later Scotch immigrants were fine people. Today their descendants are some of Barre’s foremost citizens.<sup>242</sup>

Though Miss Wheaton judged later Scottish immigrants a far better lot than their predecessors, in her opinion they compared unfavourably with Italians and Spaniards. In this case, then, southern European newcomers were held in higher esteem than immigrants from Britain. According to the informant, though, there certainly were worse immigrants than the Scots, namely the Irish and French Canadians:

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<sup>241</sup> Michael Donegal, FWP, 4. In passing: as often happens, today as in the past, it is not prejudice as such that is called into question but its target. In fact, Donegal himself seems to be prejudiced against southern Europeans and the “hot-headed” Irish.

<sup>242</sup> Miss Wheaton, FWP, 6.

No, I wouldn't begin to compare those early Scotch with the Italian and Spanish. I've always felt that the Italian and Spanish were a more refined people. Even today I'd say that of these foreign groups they are the most eager to educate their children. [...] The French? Most of them are Canucks. Ignorant, and they don't care if they are [Miss Wheaton refers to French Canadians, as the offensive nickname "Canucks" reveals]. As for the Irish, well,' – Miss Wheaton's lips curved into a smile – 'well, we have to accept them as a necessary evil.<sup>243</sup>

Another example of deep-rooted prejudice directed against a whole group of immigrants from Great Britain, Cornishmen in this case, is to be found in Mrs Niven's testimony. She portrays Cornish miners who were digging gold in Granite, Oregon, as illiterate savages, and disparagingly compares them with "niggers". The Cornishmen's clannishness as well as, perhaps, the fact that their dialect was indecipherable to Mrs Niven must have affected her view:

Working in the mines were a number of "Cornish men." [...] Their cabins were off away from the rest of us and every evening you could hear them singing their songs, many of them original. Not being able to read or write they naturally found learning fairly hard. By making the music and words up they would fulfil their singing ambitions, although the songs were expressed in vile English. I have spoken of these Cornish men almost as if they were niggers, but they were so unlettered and uncouth and so very little in common with almost everyone else in the camp, that we naturally thought of them as something apart.<sup>244</sup>

The prejudice British immigrants encountered in America was a subject on which FWP and Ellis Island fieldworkers did not focus. This nonetheless, it cropped up on various occasions in the informants' narratives, which makes the evidence provided on this issue all the more significant. Indeed, English, Scottish and Welsh newcomers were visibly and audibly different from native-born Americans, and often had to cope with narrow-mindedness and intolerance in the United States. Apparently, prejudice was expressed towards all three British nationalities and against both adult and child immigrants. Especially with regard to their way of speaking, it seems that children adjusted fairly quickly to the customs of the new country, thus counteracting ethnic tensions. However, this does not make the experiences they went through any less hurtful. Indeed, the fact that these are vividly recalled many decades after they occurred is likely due to the deep mark they left in the informants' memory.

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<sup>243</sup> Ibid., 7-8.

<sup>244</sup> Mrs Niven, FWP, 8-9.

## VII. Immigrants after all

In their recent monograph on British emigration to Australia after World War II, which draws heavily on oral histories, A. James Hammerton and Alistair Thomson observe that, “down under”, Britons are often described as “invisible” immigrants. They are consciously or unconsciously contrasted with “real” immigrants, namely those individuals from non-English speaking countries who moved to Australia in great numbers from the late 1940s and slowly transformed it into a multiracial and multicultural society. Furthermore, Hammerton and Thomson point out that scholars have tended to overlook the story of postwar British immigrants, implicitly considering them to be a group apart.<sup>245</sup> The resemblances with the American case are striking.

The predominant image of the so-called “Ten Pound Poms” appears to be too simplistic. Hammerton and Thomson acknowledge that, ‘with a few significant exceptions (such as the new suburb of Elizabeth in Adelaide), the postwar British immigrants did not form geographical and cultural enclaves, and were barely noticeable as a distinct group in the Australian population.’<sup>246</sup> Yet, in various cases the testimonies reveal Britons’ “visibility” and alienation in Australia rather than the opposite. In fact, British immigrants were subjected to ‘abuse of one form or another’, and indeed all of the interviewees told ‘stories about Pommy bashing.’<sup>247</sup> Thus, Britons were given the nickname of “whingeing Poms” – originating from the fact that some did not like what they found in Australia and most of those who were lodged in migrant hostels protested about the conditions of their accommodation – or were called, much more derogatorily, “pommy bastards.” Moreover, Australians were hypersensitive to Britons’ complaints (the “whingeing Poms” label is a proof of that), so much so that, one of the informants recalled, immigrants kept quiet if they had negative feelings about their migratory experience.<sup>248</sup>

Hammerton and Thomson also devote two chapters of their work to discussing the significant phenomenon of British return migration from Australia, which amounted to

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<sup>245</sup> A. James Hammerton and Alistair Thomson, *Ten Pound Poms. Australia’s Invisible Migrants* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2005), 10-11.

<sup>246</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.*, 145. Some testimonies point out that prejudice was directed above all towards the English, while Scottish and Welsh immigrants fared better.

<sup>248</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

about 25% of those who had moved “down under.”<sup>249</sup> This, incidentally, earned Britons another nickname, that of “boomerang migrants.” Among the most important factors affecting the informants’ decision to go back were family responsibilities and financial or job-related issues. However, the Australian lifestyle and the character of the people were also influential. Indeed, some Britons resented Australians’ prejudice and hostile comments and viewed the natives as rude and uncouth.<sup>250</sup> Above all, homesickness ‘for people, places and ways of life in Britain’ and ‘a sense of not feeling “at home” in Australia’<sup>251</sup> seem to have played a crucial role in prompting many to go back – apparently, more than a third of the informants. Summing up, Hammerton and Thomson’s research shows that Britons in Australia faced at least partly similar challenges to those met by other newcomers and provides a picture of their process of adaptation which questions the blanket definition of Britons as “invisible” immigrants. This, it is worth noting, in a country characterized by greater ethnic and cultural homogeneity compared to the U.S. in the period under examination. In fact, Australia was largely populated by people from Britain during the colonial era, and this has been true in the post-colonial period as well.<sup>252</sup> Actually, in the quarter century after the end of World War II – the time on which Hammerton and Thomson focus – over one and a half millions Britons entered Australia and, throughout the post-war period, ‘more Australians came from Britain than from any other country.’<sup>253</sup>

A critical reconsideration of the dominant narrative depicting Britons as invisible immigrants is even more necessary with regard to the United States, as this chapter has demonstrated.

In examining British immigrants’ cultural retention, their adaptation to life in the U.S. and their acceptance into American society it is important, as we have seen above, to distinguish between immigrants who left their homeland as adults and those who emigrated as children. The experience of British child immigrants is less marked in terms of cultural distinctiveness and national identity compared to that of adults. Most showed allegiance to both their native country and country of adoption, which means

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<sup>249</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, 264-98 and 300-24. The authors are ready to note that a sizeable portion of return migrants re-emigrated to Australia but also that statistics do not count those emigrants who longed to return but could not do it for financial or personal reasons.

<sup>250</sup> *Ibid.*, 284.

<sup>251</sup> *Ibid.*, 276.

<sup>252</sup> As Hammerton and Thomson remind us, ‘[t]he British had controlled and dominated the European settlement of Australia in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and thus ensured the predominance of the English language and the adaptation of Australian cultural and political life to British ways.’ *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>253</sup> *Ibid.*

that they retained a significant degree of attachment to their homeland despite growing up in America (in the case of children, of course, the issue of resistance to naturalization does not usually apply). Homesickness seem to have been felt less intensely by child immigrants, though there is evidence that at least some of them were nostalgic for life in the Old Country. They visited Britain less frequently than adult immigrants and they usually did so later in life and for different reasons (to see where they came from rather than go back to the place they called “home”). Cultural retention was also weaker in the case of people who left Britain as children. The evidence provided by the testimonies in this regard is mixed. In fact, examples of child immigrants (especially, but not only, from Scotland and Wales) who preserved important aspects of the Old Country’s culture are to be found along with cases pointing in an opposite direction. Lastly, the FWP and Ellis Island interviews show that British child immigrants were visibly and audibly different in America, and consequently encountered prejudice, especially in the first period after emigration, before they were able to remove the most evident traces of their “otherness.” The way child and adult immigrants experienced prejudice, it seems reasonable to think, followed a different pattern. Children, some of them at least, might have suffered more intense and more open prejudice from their peers at the beginning of their stay, especially at school. However, then they were socialized into the new country, and this helped them to achieve full integration, or at least greater integration than adult immigrants.

While the foregoing makes it clear that the cultural identity of British child immigrants was less marked than that of people who left Great Britain as adults, it also shows that the expression “invisible immigrants” defines their experience too simplistically. In this connection it is worth emphasizing that the experience of British child immigrants’ in America should be compared to that of “1.5” generation newcomers of other nationalities, not to that of first-generation adult immigrants.

If, with regard to the emigration of British children, the term “invisible immigrants” appears to be too simplistic, in the case of adult immigrants it is quite inadequate and misleading. In fact, the evidence provided by the FWP and Ellis Island interviews points in another direction. To begin with, Britons kept their culture alive in America in both the private and the public sphere (as acknowledged by scholars) by creating ethnic institutions, following national customs and ethnic cultural practices as well as preserving distinctive elements of their linguistic identity. Furthermore, British immigrants expressed a strong and persistent sense of belonging and attachment to their

native land which demonstrates that they did *not* “feel home” in America, did *not* adapt quickly and easily in America, as is often suggested. Moreover, they were sometimes perceived as foreign and different by the native population, and had to confront their bigotry. British adult immigrants were usually aware of living in a foreign land among strangers, frequently saw their identity as rooted in their native country, felt acutely homesick and were often reluctant to naturalize. Indeed, historians who emphasize the supposed invisibility of Britons in America seem to forget that they were immigrants after all.

## Conclusions

The FWP and Ellis Island testimonies illuminate a wide variety of aspects of the experience of British emigrants to America. They make it possible to identify general patterns, but at the same time shed light on less common, peculiar or even unique events and circumstances connected to the emigrants' move overseas. Indeed, along with uniformities, the interviews foreground the richness and diversity of Britons' migratory venture, which characterize all phases of their relocation to the United States.

The most important reasons behind Britons' departure were economic in character. It was financial straits, risk of unemployment, bleak prospects at home, dissatisfaction with their job and sometimes the all too real effects of major economic crises that represented the backdrop against which the decision to go was made. Undoubtedly, along with pressing economic needs, the pull of America, the fact that immigrants envisaged more opportunities for them and their children in the U.S., was also important in prompting emigration. However, factors other than economic need played a part, sometimes an important part, in the decision-making process of a small number of Britons. A few of the informants, for example, could easily have stayed home, but chose to better their lot in the New World. In their case, therefore, emigration can be mainly ascribed to the pull America exerted rather than the pressure of a precarious economic situation. Moreover, political ideals and democratic aspirations affected the choice of some, though they did not constitute the main reason behind the move. Departures could also be prompted by personal motives, such as the death of a family member, and sometimes it might happen that the pull of blood ties proved ultimately decisive in causing emigration.

Usually, before going, potential emigrants obtained sufficient information about America (or at least about the place to which they might be moving) and the condition of the labour market there, especially through personal correspondence. Thus, they were able to consider the risks of the move as well as the advantages they would derive from it. Exceptions to the rule in this case were represented by those who had learnt virtually nothing about America before leaving, though they certainly knew they would be able to rely on the practical help and cultural mediation of their relatives in the New World.



The emigrants' decision to go was usually fuelled by an image of America as a better place to live compared to Britain, as a country where they could find a steady, good-paying job, improve their standard of living and be rewarded for their efforts. Emigrants, in other words, were attracted by the American myth, which they usually interpreted in a pragmatic and comparative way. Some of them, though, held a highly distorted vision of the New World, revolving around the streets-paved-with-gold theme, as we have seen. These were bound to notice the sharp contrast between myth and reality when they landed in America.

Emigrants could normally rely on the help of kith and kin who had left before them to find a job or receive information about possible openings in America. Exceptionally, some were hired directly by a relative. Relatives or friends, as has been noted, would normally also provide lodgings, and generally ease the move overseas. Indeed, these were crucial factors potential emigrants considered before leaving.

The decision-making process often took a rather long time and involved the careful weighing up of pros and cons by both husband and wife, though the final decision was more frequently made by men than by women. At times it might happen that women were "forced" to go, even when they were openly opposed to the move. By contrast, there were cases in which it was women who ultimately advocated emigration overseas and whose attitude in favour or against departure proved decisive.

In the period under consideration emigration was nearly always a self-organized move, as the testimonies have confirmed. Men and women did not travel in groups but with (some of) their relatives, and at times alone (this was especially the case with married men). Yet, though it was decidedly less common, the interviews offer various examples of entire families leaving together for the U.S., and there were also emigrants who relied on the services of an external agency.

To finance their move emigrants borrowed money, sold their possessions, counted on remittances from abroad or, sometimes, on their savings. The exception to the rule in this case was represented by those who did not need to skimp, exploit remittances, ask for money or sell their belongings to cover the passage costs. Indeed, there were also a few informants who could afford buying second-class tickets to New York.

Young adults normally moved first and then sent for other members of the family (all of them in the case of married men) setting in motion a typical mechanism of chain migration. Though it was much more common for males to move first, the testimonies show that, occasionally, it was older daughters who led the migratory venture, at times

without being accompanied by their siblings. The interviews also shed light on a variety of peculiar patterns of emigration: middle-aged parents could leave with their adult children, for instance, while some emigrants moved later in life, in their forties or fifties; besides, there were cases of married men who came out with their children, leaving their wives behind, or even of married women who left before their husbands. Usually, the separation between family members who emigrated in different steps was relatively short (a few months, one or two years). Sometimes, though, a very long interval of time elapsed between the moment in which emigrants left and the moment in which they could be reunited with their family.

It is also worth pointing out that, while most emigrants only envisaged emigration to America, some considered alternative destinations and a few actually went somewhere else before opting for the U.S. Indeed, after the passing of the quota laws in the early 1920s it became more common than in the previous period to leave for Canada as a strategy to avoid quota strictures and enter the U.S. more easily.

When the time of leaving came, emigrants normally said goodbye to their relatives at home, though sometimes they were accompanied to port. In both cases, severing the ties with one's native country was an emotionally trying experience which only spared, in part, those who left at a young age.

The challenges emigrants confronted during the crossing and the circumstances in which they found themselves were similar under many respects. Nevertheless, the conditions in which they travelled and their responses to the journey were not invariably the same and, above all, in a small number of cases their journey was marked by peculiar or even unique events and situations.

The FWP interviews offer a glimpse of the ocean crossing in the sailing ship era, as a few of the informants left at mid-nineteenth century. These faced a far longer trip in much worse conditions than the emigrants of the following period. In fact, after the American Civil War emigrants normally boarded steamers. Those who left in the nineteenth century boarded older generation steamers, while after 1900 people usually crossed the ocean on faster and better equipped new vessels, featuring third class rather than steerage accommodation. At any rate, the experience on board generally remained less than positive, as the third class was usually stifling and crowded. As we have noted, though, some of the informants bought a second class ticket to America, and thus had a much more comfortable transatlantic journey.

Emigrants usually did not complain about food and accommodation on board, and at times even made appreciative comments on these. Yet a few of them, included those who boarded the newer vessels, found fault with both what they were given to eat and the place where they had to sleep. In fact, not all ships provided the same quality of service, and in any case this could be perceived differently by different travellers.

The journey usually took about two weeks on nineteenth century steamers and only about one week or even less in the twentieth century, if one travelled on the newer vessels. However, for some of those who left before 1900 the trip could still be rather long, up to three weeks or more on older steamers and in unfavourable weather conditions. Thus, in the period under consideration crossing the ocean could take some emigrants four times as long as other travellers.

Bad weather and rough waves, at least for a good part of the journey, seem to have been more frequent than mild weather and calm sea. Yet a few lucky emigrants enjoyed fair conditions all the way through. Connected with bad weather, though not exclusively, was another quite common experience ocean travellers had during part or even most of the crossing, namely that of seasickness. Much more rarely, people fell seriously ill during the trip and had to be confined in the ship's infirmary. By contrast, some enjoyed good health and thus had a more pleasant journey to America than their fellow passengers. Indeed, these travellers found various ways to spend time on board, dancing apparently being one of their favourite entertainments. More in general, while most emigrants had a far from pleasant but comparatively uneventful trip, for a few of the emigrants the crossing was indeed memorable. In fact, they were hit by severe storms which changed their ship's course, had perilous journeys due to collisions with icebergs or other vessels, or even risked being torpedoed by German U-boats during World War I.

Arrival was for many a moment of excitement and at the same time of great apprehension, because of what still lay ahead, namely the feared passage through Ellis Island and the beginning of a new life in a foreign land. The few informants who had travelled second class, though, were processed on board and thus spared the Ellis Island ordeal. For these, therefore, the emigration proper experience (both trip and entrance in the new country), was indeed much less traumatic than for the large majority of emigrants.

The passage through Ellis Island usually took the good part of a day. The crowd, the confusion, the noise, the rough handling and, above all, the thorough physical

examination and the official's interrogation, on which acceptance into the country depended, made sure that this experience remained etched in the memory of most emigrants. Even in this case, though, not everybody had the same experience or the same perception of it (in fact, some of the children did not even recall the examination process, just as they did not remember the ocean journey). Some thought they were being treated with more consideration than other immigrants because they were British, and some, apparently, passed through the examination and interview process smoothly and rather quickly, and thus do not have particularly negative memories of it.

At Ellis Island British emigrants came into close contact with people of different nationalities, whom they usually looked at with curiosity but more often with suspicion. Occasionally, though, such encounters sparked fleeting moments of genuine sympathy, as we have seen.

Those who were detained certainly had a much worse experience at Ellis Island than the majority of their fellow countrymen. All the negative feelings associated with the processing phase, such as fear of being rejected and a sense of constriction, were accentuated during detention. Racist attitudes towards other emigrants apparently also surfaced more frequently under the strain of detention, a further sign of the acute distress suffered by emigrants in such circumstances.

Emigrants were often met at Ellis Island by relatives or friends and then taken to their new home. When this was not so, they were waited for at their destination, which they usually reached by boarding a train. The experience of emigrants could be different even with regard to the means of transport they used to arrive at their final destination, though. In fact, while most took a train, others went by boat or just rode the subway to the New York neighbourhood where they were directed.

At the beginning of their stay in America emigrants usually lodged with relatives or friends, as we have pointed out. Yet exceptions to the rule can also be found with regard to this aspect of the migratory experience. In fact, some lived in hotels or boardinghouses for a while before finding a place for themselves and their family. The houses which Britons rented in America were often poor and cramped and revealed the low standard of living of their occupants. In other words, the informants' habitations in the U.S. were not normally of a better quality than those which they had occupied in Britain. However, some of the informants lived in homes that were well-furnished and in good conditions, and some were even able to buy their own houses in America.

As we have seen, most Britons were helped by kith and kin to find a job in America, which they had often been “promised” before leaving. Yet there were also some who had to look for employment themselves. Furthermore, the interviews show that many British emigrants changed various jobs at the beginning of their stay, trying to find an occupation that would suit them in the new country, which they were not always able to do. Of those who were skilled workers in Britain some found employment in their line or a similar line of work in America, while others ended up performing semi-skilled or unskilled jobs (especially in the first period of their stay, but later on as well). Yet others worked as labourers in both Britain and America.

The testimonies show that the initial period (sometimes a very long one) of most of the interviewees’ life in America proved to be difficult, and that the common experience for British immigrants in America, in the twentieth century more than in the previous period, was that of working hard for low wages and of rarely attaining upward mobility (in fact, occasionally the reverse was the case). Sometimes the informants’ economic conditions improved significantly over time, often a very long time, yet at other times this did not happen. Moreover, in a few cases, British emigrants’ move to the U.S. turned out to be indisputably a failure. As to women, they normally carried out paid work (usually unskilled and low-paying) for most of their lives, outside the house when they were girls and usually inside the home after marriage. Their earnings represented an important contribution to the budget of the immigrant family and proved absolutely crucial in times of crisis, when married women were often compelled to look again for work outside the house. Exceptions to the rule, in this case, are represented by women who could allow themselves to be “only” housewives.

In contrast to the harsh realities of life with which Britons had to cope in America – proving once again the variety of emigration experiences – the testimonies also reveal that some emigrants earned good incomes or were appointed to supervisory positions and that a few made a successful career and became wealthy in America. Moreover, some of the twentieth-century child emigrants obtained higher education, which enabled them to find good-paying employment and rise socially.

General patterns and peculiarities, experiences shared by many or by just a few, have also been identified with regard to the issues of British immigrants’ identity, sense of belonging and cultural retention in America.

The majority of informants manifested dual national allegiance, feeling both British and American. Yet this is due, as we have noted, to the higher number of children in the

overall sample and the communicative context of the interviews. In other words, the informants' response would likely have been different if they had been interviewed by non-American or, even more so, British fieldworkers. In fact, the number of adult emigrants who, many decades after departure, still showed strong attachment to their native country and still mostly or exclusively felt English, Scottish or Welsh is quite significant. The exception to the rule in the case of national loyalty is represented by those, almost all of them child emigrants, who mainly or only defined themselves as Americans.

Actually, it was not uncommon for British adult immigrants not to feel home in America, and indeed some clearly disliked life in the New World. Their attitude towards naturalization seems consistent with this. In fact, though most naturalized, only a few of them applied for citizenship a short period after emigration or out of conviction; many did it essentially for pragmatic reasons. This was particularly the case with household heads (who were normally, male). Moreover, a substantial number of the informants postponed naturalization and some chose not to become citizens of the United States. One of the reasons that affected their decision, as we have seen, was the fact of having to deny allegiance to their native country. There were also cases, though, even among adult emigrants, of Britons who were more than willing to take out their citizen papers and who enthusiastically embraced a new American identity.

Unsurprisingly, adult emigrants usually paid visits back home, often within a few years after emigration and many later on as well, a further proof of their attachment to their mother country and the people left behind. The exceptions to the rule in this case, and once again the testimonies show that there were some, are constituted by those who never went back after emigration. Child emigrants also paid return visits, yet comparatively fewer of them did. They were often motivated by a general sense of nostalgia and childhood memories, which explains why they usually returned later in life.

As we have seen, Britons, especially those who emigrated as (young) adults, preserved significant elements of their native culture, in both the private and the public sphere. Eating national dishes, celebrating traditional holidays, joining ethnic associations and attending ethnic churches, for example, were some of the ways in which English, Scottish and Welsh immigrants kept their culture alive in America. Similarly, speaking one's mother tongue (in the case of Welsh speakers) or preserve one's accent and use typical terms and expressions of British English (or regional

variations of it) established a continuity between the emigrants' life in Britain and in America. Not all immigrants, though, behaved in the same way, as we have seen. Some maintained only a few customs and traditions, which translated into an *occasional* expression of ethnic identity, others had a much more intense sense of belonging and activated elements of their cultural identity far more frequently. With regard to those who had emigrated as children, some retained important traces of their native culture while others simply did not.

Finally, one of the unpleasant realities of life in America which apparently most British emigrants did not expect they would have to confront was ethnic prejudice. Both adult and child emigrants of all British nationalities faced it. Sometimes they were "merely" the object of teasing and mockery, at other times of blatant racism. The testimonies, though, also offer examples of Britons who do not remember any significant episodes of discrimination and were apparently integrated smoothly into American society.

The analysis of the FWP and Ellis Island testimonies has also made it possible to identify some significant differences in the migratory experience specifically connected to the informants' age, gender and, to a lesser degree, nationality.

The fact of being a child at the time of leaving shaped all phases of an emigrant's venture. Children did not fully grasp what emigration entailed in practical and emotional terms, nor were they aware of the economic reasons prompting departure. Besides, they were not involved in the practical organization of the move or the decision-making process. Detachment from one's homeland was in general easier for children than for adults, not only because children could be fascinated by the vision of America they had absorbed from films and the popular press. More importantly, unlike many adults, child emigrants did not have to leave their family behind, and this certainly made the idea of moving, and the actual departure, less unsettling for them. That is why the goodbyes, at home or at port, did not have the same emotional impact on children as they had on adults. Admittedly, though, children also had personal ties and bonds of affection in the Old World that they would need to break, and indeed some could have mixed emotions with regard to emigration or be opposed to the idea of leaving.

The image children had of the United States was largely different from that of adults. Some did not know much about the place to which they were going, which made

America just a name to them. For others, the image of the New World was based upon the opposing myths of the Wild West (in which cowboys and Indians featured prominently) and the busy metropolis. As was the case with some adults, the United States were viewed by some children as a “fabulous” place, but in a different sense, unrelated to a dream of material wealth.

Needless to say, children did not have to face the difficulties connected to the journey alone. They were carefree and looked after, and this of course made a difference in the way they experienced the crossing, just as the pre-emigration and arrival stages of the move. In fact, for many children the transatlantic voyage seems to have been a time of fun rather than physical and emotional pain. Truly, they apparently suffered less from seasickness and had much more energy than adults to roam the boat and enjoy themselves on board.

Just as it had been the case with the preparation for the trip and the journey itself, at Ellis Island children were obviously spared a number of stressful experiences and tasks of which their parents needed to take care (they did not have to answer the officials’ questions and were guided in the various steps of the processing phase, for instance). Yet the testimonies show that, unlike the ocean journey, the experience at Ellis Island was quite unpleasant for children too. In fact, it could even be emotionally harder than for adults for those who happened to be detained.

As we have seen, social mobility and career progress were infrequent in America for British immigrants in the period under consideration, regardless of the age at which they left their native country. Nonetheless social advancement seems to have been somehow linked to age, though far from directly. People who left Britain as children, especially when they had older siblings and especially if they were males, usually stood more chances to pursue higher education and make a career.

With regard to the preservation of one’s national identity and native culture in the new country, the experience of child emigrants differed from that of adults in a number of ways. Unlike many adults, children did not feel estranged in the U.S. Indeed, as we have seen, the large majority of those who “felt American”, who identified mainly or exclusively with their country of adoption, were child emigrants. Unfortunately, we do not know what the general attitude of child immigrants towards naturalization would have been, as they became citizens automatically when their fathers did (and this is the case with most of them). It is reasonable to think that they would have chosen to



become citizens, though the testimonies show that there were also child emigrants who resisted naturalization.

Homesickness was also less common among child than adult emigrants, yet emotional attachment and at times acute longing for home were felt by some of those who left their mother country at a young age as well. Accordingly, fewer child emigrants than adults seem to have paid visits home, as we have seen. Above all, those who went back did it less frequently and at a different time in life (many decades after departure) than adult emigrants.

With regard to cultural retention, the behaviour of child emigrants only partially overlaps with that of people who left Britain as adults. The FWP and Ellis Island testimonies supply several instances of child emigrants who preserved distinctively English, Scottish or Welsh cultural practices. However, the retention of Old Country culture was undoubtedly more marked in (young) adult emigrants, and indeed in a number of cases the testimonies show that child immigrants did not retain or wish to retain significant traits of their native culture.

As far as elements of linguistic identity are concerned, children inevitably lost their British accent after a relatively short time in America, in this being quite different from adult emigrants. Yet they often preserved traces of Old Country lexicon in their speech (predictably, less evident than in the case of adults), which could especially be activated in contexts encouraging the expression of aspects of their native culture. Moreover, some of the children of Welsh speakers maintained the ability to converse, read and, in a few cases, even write in Welsh, while others simply switched entirely to English.

Finally, though this was by no means always the case, children also often encountered prejudice and intolerance in America, which could be quite intense, especially at the beginning of their stay. Yet, unlike adults, they were able to change their way of speaking and behaving relatively quickly. Indeed, this was their best strategy of self-defence and integration into their new country.

Women shared many of the experiences connected to emigration with men. Nevertheless, traditional sex roles and other gender-related factors affected the part they played and the experiences they had in all stages of the migratory venture, just as it was the case with child emigrants.

To begin with, though their opinion was normally taken into due account, as we have seen, the decision to move could be imposed on women and emigration undertaken

despite their strong opposition to it. In the phase preceding departure women seemed to be motivated by family ties more frequently than men, whether they advocated emigration or resisted it. In any case, they *expressed* their personal feelings about the move more frequently, while men appeared to be focussed on the necessity to assure financial support to their family.

Among other things, married women took care of the packing. They carried part of the Old World with them overseas in the form of useful implements, but they also attempted to preserve a tangible emotional connection with their native home by bringing to America objects which would remind all members of the family of their former life. Furthermore, when their husband preceded them in America, women had to perform all the tasks connected to the preparation of the trip, including those that would have been carried out by men or that would have been shared between husband and wife.

Unmarried women led the family's emigration less commonly than men, and rarely travelled alone (in fact, they often crossed the ocean with their siblings), while wives either went with their husbands or, more often, followed them at a later stage bringing their children overseas with them. Whether they travelled with their husbands or not, married women had to look after their children during the journey, just as they had done at home (and sea-sickness, it is worth noting, did not relieve them of their duties). For a mother, therefore, the trip was normally more tiring than for the rest of the family, as indeed had been the preparation for the trip.

Women's working experience was of a quite different nature compared to that of men, in America just as it had been in Britain. It mainly followed the life cycle, as we have seen: after leaving school girls worked for wages until they got married or had their first child, while married women usually contributed to the family budget by performing paid work within the home. This was the usual pattern, with some exceptions to the rule of course: in fact, married women sometimes were able to "only" devote themselves to housework whereas on various occasions mothers had to look for employment outside the house. Much less frequent was the case in which married women's decision to work for wages outside the home was not made out of necessity. The testimonies also show that women had access to a gender-biased labour market, which usually reserved unskilled and low-paying jobs for them. Admittedly, the interviews also reveal that some of the female emigrants who left in the twentieth century at a young age attended high school and obtained white-collar jobs. Yet, these

were normally of the routine and proletarianized kind. Furthermore, unlike some of the male child emigrants who went on to obtain a university degree, women did not pursue higher education.

The testimonies seem to suggest that adult women adapted less easily, felt less happy and were more homesick than male emigrants in America. This might be explained, just as in the case of the expression of feelings connected to the decision to emigrate, with patterns of socially acceptable behaviour – women can manifest emotions, indeed they are expected to, while men suppress them. Yet objective factors, namely the fact that women in the New World found themselves deprived of the practical and emotional support upon which they could count in Britain, might have played a role in this. In addition, married women resisted naturalization more than men. This, though, rather than originating from women's stronger attachment to their native land, can be possibly ascribed to the fact that they did not feel the pressure household heads felt to naturalize, nor perhaps did they fully realize the practical advantages deriving from citizenship. In other words, it was possible for women to express a position based on sentiments rather than practical issues more than it was the case with men.

Finally, as we have seen, women were entrusted with the retention, in the private sphere, of important elements of British immigrants' native culture which would have been lost by men, such as the preparation of Old Country's typical food.

Important discrepancies in the experience of British immigrants of different nationality have emerged only with regard to cultural retention in the United States. Needless to say, English, Scottish and Welsh had different traditions to cling to, and thus cultural differences that were evident in Britain continued to be so in America.

The FWP and Ellis Island testimonies confirm what scholars have traditionally pointed out, namely that the preservation of a distinctive ethnic cultural identity was more marked for the Scots and the Welsh than for the English. This seems to have been especially the case with regard to the *public* manifestation of immigrants' cultural identity through the activities of ethnic agencies and institutions, the organization of cultural festivals such as the Welsh eisteddfod or the celebration of central dates of the Scottish festive calendar such as Robert Burns's night, for instance.

Other distinctive elements of ethnic culture the FWP and Ellis Island oral histories foreground are Scottish dancing and Welsh love for music and singing, the latter often connected to religious worship. In fact, the interviews reveal that religion was an

important aspect of Welsh culture which was carried over to the United States and distinguished the Welsh from the other British immigrants. Indeed, many Welsh immigrants to the U.S. were active members of their own churches.

One more cultural element distinguishing many of the Welsh from the other Britons, as we have noted, was their linguistic identity. In fact, a large number of those who emigrated in the period under consideration were Welsh speakers (usually bilingual), and were used to employ Welsh not only in a religious context but often also as a means of personal communication. As the testimonies show, adult Welsh speakers tried hard to keep their language alive in America and transmit it to their children. Sometimes they succeeded, at other times they did not.

Lastly, it is worth remembering that the evidence supplied by the FWP and Ellis Island oral histories has made it possible to test two ingrained notions concerning the experience of British immigrants in the United States, namely their “success” (the attainment of economic well-being and social mobility) and their cultural “invisibility”. These, arguably, are the most important issues tackled in this work.

We will not illustrate, once again, the predominant positions on such matters expressed in the literature on the subject nor will we summarize the results of our analysis, which are expounded in Chapter 5 and 6. What needs to be stressed here is that, with regard to British immigrants’ working conditions, career mobility and level of income, the FWP and Ellis Island testimonies provide a different picture from the one usually painted by historians, and that the evidence supplied by the interviews also questions the widespread claim of the relatively quick and smooth integration of Britons into American society. Indeed, the term “invisible immigrants” appears to be clearly inappropriate for defining the experience of British adult emigrants in the United States, and too simplistic even when applied to the experience of child immigrants.

As has been noted, a factor strengthening the image of Britons as invisible immigrants is the contrast between them and the massive waves of “new” immigrants who entered the United States from 1880 to the 1920s, whose distinctive economic and cultural background was very noticeable in America. The classic account of new immigrants’ experience in the Great Migration era portrays them as poor and visible (that is, different from the native-born population). Immigrants who flocked to the United States in large numbers in this period worked hard for low wages, lived in crowded and dilapidated houses, clung to their culture and confronted deep prejudice

and bigotry. Indeed, in conclusion to this study it is worth emphasizing that the picture emerging from the FWP and Ellis Island interviews reveals that the experience of Britons in America was more similar to that of other immigrants than it has generally been recognized.

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# APPENDICES

## I. Informants' profiles

Informants have been divided by nationality, gender and corpus of sources. For each of the interviewees the following information is provided: where and when they were born, year of arrival and age at arrival in the United States, name of interviewer and date in which the interview was conducted. Unfortunately, various FWP life histories do not supply some of this data.

The "other interviews" have been listed separately, and the reason why they have been defined as such is briefly stated in square brackets. Further useful information about the interviewees – for example, if they returned to their homeland or emigrated to a different country before entering the U.S. – is also specified.

### 1. Federal Writers' Project interviews

#### *English men*

- MR. "B", born in Newcastle, England, in 1875; interviewed by Elizabeth M. Buckingham, January 11, 1940; age at arrival not specified. University of Connecticut Libraries, Storrs, CT.
- BIGGS WILLIAM E., born in Gloucester, England, in 1868; interviewer not specified, October 21, 1937; arrived 1881, aged 13. Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma City, OK.
- BROWN EDWARD, born in Maidenhead, Berkshire, England, in 1873; interviewed by Mayme Corbit, July 17, 1940; arrived 1911, aged 38. State Historical Society of North Dakota, Bismarck, ND.
- CAVE ARTHUR, born in London, England, birthdate not specified; interviewed by Luana Creel, date not specified; aged at arrival not specified. Indiana State University, Terre Haute, IN.
- CONGRAM SAM, born in England in 1855; interviewed by Robert W. Small, January 12, 1938; arrived 1870, aged 15. Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma City, OK.
- COWLEY THOMAS, born in Cockfield, Durham, England, in 1860; interviewed by Wilton B. Olson, November 12, 1940; arrived 1911, aged 51. State Historical Society of North Dakota, Bismarck, ND.
- CRAVEN HERBERT, born in Chester, England in 1871; interviewed by Marvin E. Griffith, February 16, 1940; arrived 1876, aged 5. Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, NE.
- DOMONEY SIDNEY HERBERT, born in Southampton, England, in 1864; interviewed by Ruby James, 1936; arrived 1871, aged 7. Salina Public Library, Salina, KS.
- FLINT JOHN HAMFORD, born in Glossop, Derbyshire, England, in 1870; interviewed by Anna R. Barry, December 15, 1937; age at arrival not specified. Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma City, OK.

HAMMOND JOHN, born in England in 1887; interviewed by Mary S. Venable, June 30, 1939; age at arrival not specified. The Library of Virginia, Richmond, VA.

HARRIS JAMES G., born in England in 1868; interviewed by Hazel Dwinell, date not specified; arrived 1883, aged 15. Washington State Library, Olympia, WA.

LEIGHT ALLAN F. CAPTAIN, born in Hull, England, birthdate not specified; interviewed by George Conway, January 17, 1939; age at arrival not specified. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, NC.

NUNN GEORGE, born in Barnham, England, in 1867; interviewed by Rector Lilliam M., date not specified; arrived 1885, aged 18. State Historical Society of North Dakota, Bismarck, ND.

PALMER ARTHUR, born in England in 1875; interviewed by Sylvia Helsher, 1936; age at arrival not specified. Salina Public Library, Salina, KS.

PLATT WILLIAM A., born in Liverpool, England, in 1855; interviewer not specified; March 3, 1939; arrived 1873, aged 18. The University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC.

SAFFORD HENRY N., born in Colinworth, Bedfordshire, England, in 1867; interviewed by Harold J. Moss, October 17, 1938; arrived 1885, aged 18. Library of Congress, Washington D.C., American Memory.

SMALLEY ROBERT, born in Lincolnshire, England, in 1866; interviewed by Leona A. Gauthier, June 17-18, 1940; arrived 1875, aged 9. State Historical Society of North Dakota, Bismarck, ND.

THOMAZIN TOM, born in England in 1863; interviewed by Maude Swanson, November 25, 1940; arrived 1872, aged 9. Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, NE.

WRAY GEORGE, born near York, England, in 1851; interviewed by Charles Taylor, September 13, 1940; arrived 1870, aged 19. State Historical Society of North Dakota, Bismarck, ND.

### *English women*

“ANONYMOUS ENGLISHWOMAN”, born in London, England, in 1873; interviewed by Elizabeth M. Buckingham, February 1, 1940; age at arrival not specified. University of Connecticut Libraries, Storrs, CT.

BUNDY ADELINE, born in Leicester, England, in 1877; interviewed by H. J. Moss, March 31, 1941; arrived 1904, aged 27. Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, NE.

CHADWICK HULL MARY ANN, born in England in 1843; interviewed by John F. Ryan, August 15, 1936; arrived 1848, aged 5. Idaho State University Library, Pocatello, ID.

COLLINS MARY ELIZABETH, born in Cambridgeshire, England, in 1868; interviewed by Maude R. Chandler, December 27, 1939; arrived 1882, aged 14. The Library of Virginia, Richmond, VA.

COUNSELL HESNARD HATTIE, born in England in 1851; interviewed by Maude Swanson, April 30, 1940; arrived 1856, aged 6. Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, NE.

MRS. GROGAN T.W., born near London, England, in 1864; interviewed by Leona A. Gauthier, August 23, 1940; to Canada in 1881, to Iowa around 1890-91, aged 26. State Historical Society of North Dakota, Bismarck, ND.

- HALL BEACH SUSAN, born in Alconbury, Cambridgeshire, England, in 1848; interviewer not specified, June 28, 1941; arrived 1853, aged 5. Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, NE.
- HARRIS EMMA JANE, born in Devonshire, England, in 1851; interviewed by William A. Glenn, August 7-8, 1939; to Canada in 1857, to North Dakota in 1920, aged 69. State Historical Society of North Dakota, Bismarck, ND.
- MRS. "L.", born in Coventry, Warwickshire, England, birthdate not specified; interviewed by Elizabeth M. Buckingham, December 11, 1939; arrived 1916, age at arrival not specified. University of Connecticut Libraries, Storrs, CT.
- MRS. ROBERTS J.H., born in Burton upon Trent, England, in 1883; interviewed by Leona A. Gauthier, January 1940; arrived 1913, aged 30. State Historical Society of North Dakota, Bismarck, ND.
- SUFFOLK VIRGINIA, born in Bradford, West Yorkshire, England, in 1881; interviewed by Barbara Berry Darsey, February 14, 1939; arrived 1905, aged 24. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, NC.

### *Scottish men*

- "ANONYMOUS SCOTSMAN", born in Scotland, birthdate not specified; interviewed by William J. Mullane, 27 March 1940; year of arrival not specified, aged 10. University of Connecticut Libraries, Storrs, CT.
- BIRNIE BRUCE, born in Aberdeen, Scotland, birthdate not specified; interviewed by Mari Tomasi, date not specified; aged 9. Library of Congress, Washington D.C., American Memory.
- CRUMMET JOHN, born in Scotland in 1897; interviewed with his wife by Mary S. Venable, January 21, 1939; arrived 1924, aged 27. The Library of Virginia, Richmond, VA.
- BERNIE DAVE, born in Edinburgh, Scotland, birthdate not specified; interviewed by Roaldus Richmond, September 14, 1940; arrived 1900, age at arrival not specified. Library of Congress, Washington D.C., American Memory.
- DONEGAL MICHAEL, born in Aberdeen, Scotland, birthdate not specified; interviewed by Roaldus Richmond, September 14, 1940; year of arrival not specified, age at arrival not specified. Library of Congress, Washington D.C., American Memory.
- MUIR THOMAS, born in Catrine, Scotland in 1857, interviewed by Nora L. Lorrin, April 19, 1938; arrived 1875, aged 18. Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma City, OK.
- RUSSELL ALEX, born in Elgin, Scotland, in 1854; interviewed by Bernard Kjenstad, date not specified; arrived 1883 [to Canada in 1856; to South Dakota in 1883], aged 29. State Historical Society of North Dakota, Bismarck, ND.
- SMITH FEA JOSEPH, born in Falkirk, Scotland, in 1850; interviewer not specified, date not specified; arrived 1854, aged 4. Washington State Library, Olympia, WA.
- WALDIE ROBERT, born in Scotland, in 1855; interviewed by Naomi L. Garringer, date not specified; year of arrival not specified, age at arrival not specified. Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma City, OK.
- WHYTOCK WILLIAM, born in Edinburgh, Scotland, in 1857; interviewer not specified, date not specified; arrived 1884, aged 27. Library of Congress, Washington D.C., American Memory.

### ***Scottish women***

- MRS. CRUMMET, born in Scotland in 1899; interviewed with her husband by Mary S. Venable, January 21, 1939; arrived 1924, aged 25. The Library of Virginia, Richmond, VA.
- MRS. RUSSELL W.T., born in Scotland in 1863; interviewed by James Campbell, December 17, 1941; arrived 1885, aged 22. Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, NE.
- Miss "Y", born in Ayreshire, Scotland, birthdate not specified; interviewed by M.G. Sayers and P.K. Russo, March 13, 1939; arrived 1924, age at arrival not specified. Connecticut Libraries, Storrs, CT.

### ***Welsh men***

- JONES JOHN G., born in Wales in 1861; interviewer not specified; December 13, 1938; arrived 1869, aged 8. Pennsylvania State Archives, Harrisburg, PA.

### ***Welsh women***

- WILLIAMS RACHEL, born in Wales in 1879; interviewed by Maude Swanson, May 24, 1940; arrived 1902, aged 23. Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, NE.

### ***Other interviews***

- "A SCOTCH QUARRYMAN'S WIDOW", interviewed by Mari Tomasi, September 3, 1940. Library of Congress, Washington D.C., American Memory. [Widow of a 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Scottish immigrant; on granite workers in Barre, Vermont]
- BAILEY ALBERT, born in England, interviewer and interview date not specified; arrived 1883. Library of Congress, Washington D.C., American Memory. [On English clockmaking]
- MRS. BUCHANAN ARTHUR., born in 1880; interviewed by Mark Phinney, date not specified. Oregon State Library, Salem, OR. [Wife of a 2<sup>nd</sup> generation English immigrant]
- WIDOW BUCKINGHAM, born in Sheffield, England; interviewer not specified; 1938-39; age at arrival: 6. Library of Congress, Washington D.C., American Memory. [On Connecticut knifemakers]
- DUTCHER WILLIAM, not British. Library of Congress, Washington D.C., American Memory. [On Connecticut knifemakers]
- MRS. GERBATI, not British; interviewed by Roaldus Richmond, August 12, year not specified. Library of Congress, Washington D.C., American Memory. [On a Sunday afternoon at the place of an Italian quarryman's widow]

MRS. GLASSON RICHARD, interviewed by Caldwell Sims; December 15, 1938. Library of Congress, Washington D.C., American Memory. [Wife of an English immigrant]

HIGGINS JIM, not British, interviewer not specified, 1938-39. Library of Congress, Washington D.C., American Memory. [On Connecticut knifemakers]

HUGHES WILLIAM RICHARD, born in Wales in 1845; interviewed by C. F. Derven, September 9, 1938; arrived in 1853, aged 8. Library of Congress, Washington D.C., American Memory. [On Eisteddfods, Welsh poetry and Welsh bands]

JACKSON ED and MARY, interviewer not specified, September 27, 1938. Library of Congress, Washington D.C., American Memory. [Jackson Ed is 3<sup>rd</sup> generation Welsh; on farm work]

JACKSON MATTIE, born in Pennsylvania in 1858; interviewed by Rose Shepard; May 10, 1939. Library of Congress, Washington D.C., American Memory. [Wife of a Scottish immigrant]

KERR CHARLES, 2<sup>nd</sup> generation English. Library of Congress, Washington D.C., American Memory. [On Connecticut knifemakers]

KLOCKER CHARLES, not British; interviewer not specified, 1938-39. Library of Congress, Washington D.C., American Memory. [On Connecticut knifemakers]

KNOTT MARY, 3<sup>rd</sup> generation English; interviewed by M.V. Rourke, 20 March 1939. University of Connecticut Libraries, Storrs, CT.

MRS. "L.", 3<sup>rd</sup> generation English, interviewed by Elizabeth M. Buckingham, December 19, 1939. The University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT.

MRS. LARSON W.R., born in Kent, England, in 1891; interviewed by Harold J. Moss, September 29, 1939 and October 1, 1939; arrived 1907; aged 16. Library of Congress, Washington D.C., American Memory. [About English customs, songs, sayings, food, festivals]

MR. MACCURRIE, born in Scotland; interviewed by Francis Donovan, January 20 and February 15, 1939; Library of Congress, Washington D.C., American Memory. [On politics and foreign news]

"MR. MACCURRIE and JOSH". Library of Congress, Washington D.C., American Memory. [Josh is 2<sup>nd</sup> generation English; on Connecticut knifemakers]

MR. MACPHERSON,; interviewed by Mari Tomasi, September 30, 1940[?]. Library of Congress, Washington D.C., American Memory. [Scotch-Irish shop assistant speaking about his Scottish grandfather]

MR. and MRS. MARSH, not British. Library of Congress, Washington D.C., American Memory. [On Connecticut knifemakers]

MORI DOMINICK, not British; interviewed by Roaldus Richmond, February 27, 1941. Library of Congress, Washington D.C., American Memory. [On a working day in a granite quarry]

MORRIS JONES EVAN, born in North Wales in 1883; interviewed by C. F. Derven, August 30, 1938. Library of Congress, Washington D.C., American Memory. [On Welsh poetry, songs and 'tales']

MRS. NIVEN NEIL, not British, born in 1872; interviewed by William C. Haight; April 21, 1939. Library of Congress, Washington D.C., American Memory. [Information on Cornish immigrants]

ODENWALD PETER, not British, interviewer not specified, 1938-9, Library of Congress, Washington D.C., American Memory. [On English knifemakers]

MRS. OLIVER ROBERT, born in Scotland in 1877; interviewed by Rebecca M. Halley, November 19, 1938; arrived 1910, aged 33. Library of Congress, Washington D.C., American Memory. [Mainly on Scottish food]



- PEREZ PEPE, mother Scottish; interviewed by Mari Tomasi, August 5, 1940. Library of Congress, Washington D.C., American Memory. [On work in a granite quarry in Barre, Vermont]
- MRS. READER ENIS, interviewed by Bessie Jollenstone, November 25, 1938. Library of Congress, Washington D.C., American Memory. [Wife of an English immigrant; On cattle ranching]
- RICHMOND GEORGE, 2<sup>nd</sup> generation English. Library of Congress, Washington D.C., American Memory. [On English clockmaking]
- ROBERTS ELLEN, born in North Wales in 1864; interviewed by C. F. Derven, August 29 and September 6, 1938; arrived 1869, aged 5. Library of Congress, Washington D.C., American Memory. [On Welsh Eisteddfods]
- ROBERTS SETH, born in Vermont in 1880, 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Welsh; interviewed by C. F. Derven, September 8, 1938. Library of Congress, Washington D.C., American Memory. [On Welsh Eisteddfods]
- RYDELL "DAD", born in England; interviewed by Luline Mabry, March 21, 1939. Library of Congress, Washington D.C., American Memory. [On the character, family and commercial activity of an English fruit trader]
- MRS. SCOVILE H.; interviewed by Verna L. Stamolis, December 20, 1938. Library of Congress, Washington D.C., American Memory. [On the purchase of a Chinese laundry shop by an English family]
- "SPEAKING OF CREDIT", interview by Mari Tomasi, September 30, 1940 [?]. Library of Congress, Washington D.C., American Memory. [3<sup>rd</sup> generation. Scotch-Irish shop assistant speaks about his Scottish grandfather]
- MISS WHEATON; interviewed by Mari Tomasi, July 29 1940 [?]. Library of Congress, Washington D.C., American Memory. [On Barre, Vermont, and quarrymen of various nationalities]
- MRS. WHITTINGTON ROLAND, born in Bethesda, Caernarvonshire, North Wales, in 1883; interviewed by C. F. Derven, September 6, 1938; arrived 1889; aged 6. Library of Congress, Washington D.C., American Memory. [On Welsh Eisteddfods]

## 2. Ellis Island Oral History Project

### *English men*

- ADAMS CHARLES ALFRED, born in London in 1915; interviewed by Kate Moore, December 6, 1998; arrived 1923, aged 8. KM Series 7.
- AMBLER ARNOLD, born in Halifax, Yorkshire, England, in 1899; interviewed by Edward Applebome, October 10, 1985; arrived 1920, aged 21. AKRF Series 044.
- CHEESEMAN CYRIL EDWARD, born in Dover, England, in 1907; interviewed by Janet Levine, August 15, 2001; arrived 1914, aged 7. EI Series 1219.
- COHEN HENRY, born in London, England, in 1912; interviewed by Janet Levine, April 8, 1994; arrived 1927, aged 15. EI Series 453.
- CROLLICK RALPH L., born in West Kirby, Cheshire, England, in 1916; interviewed by Janet Levine, December 10, 1999; arrived 1926, aged 10. EI Series 1118.

DICKSON ARTHUR W., born in London, England, in 1921; interviewed by Janet Levine, June 30, 1993; arrived 1925, aged 4. EI Series 341.

JOHNSON KEN, born in England, in 1898; interviewed by Andrew Phillips, March 24, 1989; arrived 1929, aged 5. DP Series 5.

JOHNSON THOMAS, born in London, England, in 1899; interviewed by Dana Gumb, January 23, 1985; arrived 1920, aged 21. AKRF Series 004.

LIBMAN MORRIS, born in London, in 1914; interviewed by Janet Levine, August 25, 1991; arrived 1923, aged 9. EI Series 72. [Russian parents]

NORBURY HARRY, born in Ashton-Under-Lyne, Lancashire, England, in 1901; interviewed by Janet Levine, September 6, 1992; arrived 1923, aged 21. EI Series 167.

PIKE SIDNEY, born in Kenley, Surrey, England, in 1899; interviewed by Nancy Dallett, August 6, 1985; arrived 1910, aged 11. AKRF Series 14.

PRICE ERIC A., born in Gillingham, Kent, England, in 1908; interviewed by Janet Levine, December 6, 1994; arrived 1915, aged 6. EI Series 579.

ROBINSON JAMES, born in Birmingham, England, in 1909; interviewed by Paul E. Sigrist Jr., July 9, 1999; arrived 1920, aged 10. EI Series 1090.

SARGENT REECE THOMAS, born in London, England, in 1914; interviewed by Kate Moore, January 25, 1994; arrived 1923, aged 8. KM Series 033.

SILVER ABRAHAM, born in Liverpool, England, in 1911; interviewed by Elysa Matsen, September 13, 1994; arrived 1930, aged 19. EI Series 543.

SONNES HARRY, born in London, England, in 1914; interviewed by Janet Levine, 1998; arrived 1920, aged 6. EI Series 1011.

WEBSTER HIGGINS ARCHIBALD, born in Barrow-in-Furness, England, in 1921; interviewed by Janet Levine, January 3 2005; arrived 1924, aged 3. EI Series 1363.

### *English women*

BAITZ POWDERLEY MARY JANE, born in Liverpool, England, in 1910; interviewed by Paul E. Sigrist Jr., February 23, 1993; arrived 1922, aged 11. EI Series 250.

BARHAM KATE, born in Portsmouth, England, in 1903; interviewed by Dana Gumb, September 16, 1985; arrived 1929, aged 26. AKRF Series 034.

BERLINGHOFF SEFTON MYRTLE, born in Weymouth, Sussex, England, in 1913; interviewed by Janet Levine, December 12, 1993; arrived 1920, aged 7. EI Series 419.

DEAN MILLVINA, born in 1912, birthplace not specified; interviewed by Janet Levine, May 18, 1995; arrived 1912, aged 9 weeks. EI Series 616.

DREW ELLA, born in Stony [Littleton], Somerset, England, in 1900; interviewed by Paul E. Sigrist Jr., October 18, 1997; arrived 1924, aged 24. EI Series 969. [Returned to England in 1930]

FEUER SONIS FRIEDA, born in London, England, in 1920; interviewed by Janet Levine, April 14, 1999; arrived 1920, aged 4. EI Series 1061.

GLASER ETTIE, born in London, England, in 1905; interviewed by Dana Gumb, January 24, 1986; arrived 1923, aged 18. AKRF Series 129.

HALVORSEN FRANCES, born in Liverpool, England, in 1920; interviewed by Janet Levine, June 3, 2005; arrived 1920, aged 5 months. EI Series 1379.

HARLOW EASON KATHLEEN, born in Duston, a suburb of Northampton, England, 1915; interviewed by Janet Levine, May 18, 1993; arrived 1920, aged 4. EI Series 317.

HOCKRIDGE BRIERLEY ELSIE, born in Chadderton, Lancashire, England, in 1902; interviewed by Paul E. Sigrist Jr., October 29, 1993; arrived 1904, aged 2. EI Series 405.

JACOBSON JENNIE, born in London, England, birthdate not specified; interviewed by Debra Allee, February 7, 1986; arrived 1908, age at arrival not specified. AKRF Series 141.

JONES GIBBS DOROTHY, born in Leiccester, England, in 1906; interviewed by Janet Levine, March 29, 1999; arrived 1908, aged 2. EI Series 1060.

JONES SYLVIA, born in Birmingham, England, in 1904; interviewed by Paul E. Sigrist Jr., August 26, 1995; arrived 1911, aged 7. EI Series 658.

KOCH SHEILA, born in London, England, in 1931; interviewed by Janet Levine, March 14, 1999; arrived 1940, aged 8. EI Series 1046.

LAMBERT GLADYS, born in Langley Green, Essex, England, in 1899; interviewed by Paul E. Sigrist Jr., May 2, 1995; arrived 1914, aged 14. EI Series 612.

LENHART KENDERLINE RUTH ELEANOR, born in London, England, in 1914; interviewed by Dana Gumb, September 5, 1985; arrived 1921, aged 7. AKRF Series 022.

MACKLER REBECCA, born in Hull, England, in 1900; interviewed by Paul E. Sigrist Jr., September 27, 1996; arrived 1915, aged 15. EI Series 810.

MOROZOV KITTY, born in London, England, in 1900; interviewed by Edward Applebome, February 7, 1986; arrived 1907, aged 7. AKRF Series 150.

NIMMO ELIZABETH, born in South Shields, Tyne and Wear, England, in 1904; interviewed by Willa Appel, February 11, 1986; arrived 1920, aged 16. AKRF Series 147.

NORRIS FLORENCE, born in Manchester, England, in 1893; interviewed by Nancy Dallett, February 3, 1986; arrived 1915, aged 22. AKRF Series 117.

OAKLEY FRANCES, born in London, England, in 1907; interviewed by Nancy Dallett, December 11, 1985; arrived 1914, aged 6. AKRF Series 100.

PIERCE WHAITE ELLEN, born in Padiham, Lancashire, England, in 1905; interviewed by Andrew Phillips, May 22, 1989; arrived 1920, aged 15. DP Series 25.

RODWIN MINNIE, born in London, England, in 1907; interviewed by Janet Levine, February 12, 1997; arrived 1910, aged 3. EI Series 845.

RUSSELL WOOD FANNIE, born in Surrey, England, in 1890; interviewed by Paul E. Sigrist Jr., May 28, 1997; arrived around 1893, aged approximately 3. EI Series 895.

RYAN EDITH, born in London, England, in 1895; interviewed by Margo Nash, January 2, 1974; arrived 1921, aged 26. NPS Series 47.

SPINNEY ROGERS PHYLLIS, born in Southampton, England, in 1905; interviewed by Janet Levine, September 17, 1992; arrived 1920, aged 15. EI Series 213.

STENZEL PAYNE DOREEN, born in Birmingham, England, in 1920; interviewed by Paul E. Sigrist Jr., September 21, 1993; arrived 1929, aged 9. EI Series 391.

TANNER LEWIS VERA ROSE, born in Bishop's Waltham, Hampshire, England, in 1899; interviewed by Paul E. Sigrist Jr., January 22, 1992; arrived 1920, aged 20. EI Series 120.

WARNER DOROTHY I., born in Newcastle, England, in 1921; interviewed by Paul E. Sgrist Jr., May 17, 1995; arrived 1924, aged 3. EI Series 615 [Returned to England in 1935]

WHITTLE MARGARET A., born in Newcastle, England, 1908; interviewed by Paul E. Sigrist Jr., May 17, 1995; arrived 1925, aged 17. EI Series 614 [Returned to England in 1935].

### ***Scottish men***

ALLAN THOMAS, born in Tillicoultry, Clackmannanshire, Scotland, in 1918; interviewed by Jean Kolva, July 16, 1984; arrived 1927, aged 9. NPS Series 149; interviewed by Janet Levine, June 25, 2001; arrived 1927, aged 9. EI Series 1206.

CARNEGIE JACK, born in Dundee, Scotland, in 1916; interviewed by Janet Levine, February 15, 1996; arrived 1921, aged 5. EI Series 729.

DALY JOHN, born in Dumbarton, Scotland, in 1923; interviewed by Elysa Matsen, October 20, 1994; arrived 1929, aged 6. EI Series 558.

DELANEY JOSEPH, born in Glasgow, Scotland, in 1903; interviewed by Dana Gumb, September 5, 1985; arrived 1922, aged 19. AKRF Series 023.

FRASER DOUGLAS, born in Glasgow, Scotland, in 1916; interviewed by Kevin Daley, February 14, 2007; arrived 1923, aged 7. EI Series 1379.

GUNN ALLAN, born in Glasgow, Scotland, in 1916; interviewed by Paul E. Sigrist Jr., June 20, 1992; arrived 1925, aged 9. EI Series 179.

MCGUIRE WILLIAM A., born in Blantyre, Lanarkshire, Scotland, in 1921; interviewed by Kate Moore, July 30, 1994; arrived 1928, aged 7. KM Series 077.

PEAK PATRICK, born in Glasgow, Scotland, in 1912; interviewed by Nancy Dallett, November 15, 1985; arrived 1921, aged 9. AKRF Series 084.

SALTMAN DAVID, born in Glasgow, in 1912; interviewed by Janet Levine, September 26, 1991; arrived 1922, aged 9. EI Series 097. [Russian parents]

WILL JOHN, born in Cupar, Fife, Scotland, in 1917; interviewed by Elysa Matsen, September 16, 1994; arrived 1924, aged 7. EI Series 547.

### ***Scottish women***

COOK WILSON MARGARET, born in Nisbet, Scottish Borders, Scotland, in 1911; interviewed by Janet Levine, February 23, 1994; arrived 1920, aged 9. EI Series 435.

CROSS HAVENICK ANNE, born in Glasgow, Scotland, in 1895; interviewed by Janet Levine, July 25, 1993; arrived 1902, aged 6. EI Series 357.

DEEKS ELLA (ISABELLA), born in Cathcart [a suburb of Glasgow], Scotland, in 1914; interviewed by Janet Levine, April 13, 1997; arrived 1923, aged 9. EI Series 869.

DUNN MARY, born in Stirling, Scotland, in 1905; interviewed by Dana Gumb, January 23, 1986; arrived 1923, aged 18. AKRF Series 127.

FAIRCHILD AGNES, born in Edinburgh, Scotland, in 1900; interviewed by Janet Levine, January 1999; arrived 1911, aged 10. EI Series 1034.

GAGE GRACE, born in Glasgow, Scotland, in 1919; interviewed by Janet Levine, March 16, 1999; arrived 1922, aged 3. EI Series 1050. [Daughter of Christina Spratt]

HANSEN BAXTER HELEN, born in Edinburgh, Scotland, in 1989; interviewed by Andrew Phillips, August 30, 1989; arrived 1923, age 8. DP Series 46.

- HOPKINS LILLIAN, born in Glasgow, Scotland, in 1916; interviewed by Kate Moore, July 18, 1994; arrived 1925, aged 9. KM Series 70.
- KENDRICK CUNNINGHAM MARY, born in Auchinleck, Ayrshire, Scotland, in 1918; interviewed by Paul E. Sigrist Jr., July 7, 1994; arrived 1927, aged 7. EI Series 492.
- KERR MARIAN, born in Stevenson, Ayrshire, Scotland, in 1917; interviewed by Janet Levine, July 17, 2001; arrived 1922 or 1923, aged 5 or 6. EI Series 1209. [Returned to Scotland in 1927 or 1928]
- KIRK SEATON MARGARET, born in Glasgow, Scotland, in 1901; interviewed by Paul E. Sigrist Jr., February 25, 1994; arrived 1923, aged 22. EI Series 440.
- LINDSAY HENRIETTA, born in Glasgow, Scotland, in 1916; interviewed by Janet Levine, July 18, 2001; arrived 1924, aged 8. EI Series 1211. [Stayed less than one year in the U.S., then went to Canada and finally returned to Scotland]
- MCCANN ELLEN, born in 1917, in Glasgow, Scotland; interviewed by Janet Levine, July 18, 2001; arrived 1922, aged 5. EI Series 1210. [Returned to Scotland in 1927]
- MORAN MARGARET, born in Whitburn, West Lothian, Scotland, in 1923; interviewed by Janet Levine, June 15, 2000; arrived 1927, aged 3. EI Series 1150.
- NELSON ANN BARBARA, born in Bathgate, West Lothian, Scotland, in 1915; interviewed by Janet Levine, December 8, 1996; arrived 1923, aged 7. EI Series 832.
- PEDERSEN LINDSAY DALY MAISIE (MARY), born in Greenock, Scotland, in 1906; interviewed by Paul E. Sigrist Jr., February 26, 1994; arrived 1924, aged 18. EI Series 442.
- QUINN REILLY ANNE, born in Paisley, Scotland, in 1918; interviewed by Dennis Cloutier and Peter Kaplan, December 8, 1983; arrived 1928, aged 9. NPS Series 146.
- ROHAN ISABELLA, born in Dundee, Scotland, in 1903; interviewed by Paul E. Sigrist Jr., October 13, 1996; arrived 1913, aged 9. EI Series 823.
- ROSS ANNIE, born in London, in 1930; interviewed by Janet Levine, September 28, 2000; arrived 1935, aged 5. EI Series 1167. [Her parents were actors on tour; a week after birth she went back to Scotland, near Glasgow]
- SCHILLING DOURISH AGNES, born in Motherwell, Scotland, in 1906; interviewed by Janet Levine, June 16, 1992; arrived 1922, aged 15. EI Series 172.
- SPRATT CHRISTINA, born in Glasgow, Scotland, in 1898; interviewed by Janet Levine, March 16, 1999; arrived 1922, aged 23. EI Series 1049. [Mother of Grace Gage]
- TWADDLE SARAH, born in Glasgow, Scotland, in 1923; interviewed by Janet Levine, July 23, 2001; arrived 1926, aged 3. EI Series 1216. [Returned to Scotland in 1931]

### ***Welsh men***

- DONALD ROBERTS, born in Wales, town not specified, in 1913; interviewed by Edward Applebome, August 15, 1985; arrived 1925, aged 12. AKRF Series 018.
- EYLES EDWARD, born in Wales, birthplace not specified, in 1913; interviewed by Jane Levine, November 21, 1994; arrived 1920, aged 7. EI Series 570.
- POWELL GLYNNE THOMAS, born in Talysarn, North Wales, in 1904; interviewed by Paul E. Sigrist Jr., January 30, 1993; arrived 1913, aged 8. EI Series 243.
- REESE JONES ROBERT, born in Blaenau Ffestiniog, North Wales, in 1902; interviewed by Paul E. Sigrist Jr., January 30, 1993; arrived 1920, aged 18. EI Series 242.

TIPPLES ARTHUR, born in Wales, town not specified, in 1909; interviewed by Elysa Matsen, September 14, 1994; arrived 1916, aged 7. EI Series 545.  
WILLIAMS KYFFIN, born in Colwyn Bay, North Wales, Wales, in 1894; interviewed by Paul E. Sigrist Jr., January 30, 1993; arrived 1914, aged 19. EI Series 244.  
WILLIAMS MILTON ROBERT, born in Pwllheli, North Wales, Wales, in 1898; interviewed by Paul E. Sigrist Jr., July 8, 1994; arrived 1907, aged 10. EI Series 495.

### ***Welsh women***

DISORDA MARGARET, born in Llandwrog, North Wales, in 1915; interviewed by Paul E. Sigrist Jr., November 14, 1994; arrived 1920, aged 5. EI Series 566.  
EVANS PARRY ANNIE, born in Llanfaelog, North Wales, in 1902; interviewed by Paul E. Sigrist Jr., January 31, 1993; arrived 1923, aged 21. EI Series 246.  
HINMAN ELIZABETH, born in Rhostryfan, North Wales, in 1899; interviewed by Paul E. Sigrist Jr., August 20, 1996; arrived 1920, aged 21. EI Series 791.  
HUGHES EPHRAIM WINIFRED, born in Blaenau Ffestiniog, North Wales, in 1907; interviewed by Paul E. Sigrist Jr., January 31, 1993; arrived 1912, aged 5. EI Series 245.  
JONES GRIFFITHS ENID, born in Abertillery, South Wales, in 1912; interviewed by Janet Levine, April 18, 1993; arrived 1923, aged 10. EI Series 286.  
MATTHEWS MARIAN, born in Port Talbot, South Wales, in 1916; interviewed by Janet Levine, March 11, 1999; arrived 1929, aged 12. EI Series 1039.  
WILLIAMS GRIFFITHS MARY JANE, born in Abertillery, South Wales, in 1914; interviewed by Janet Levine, April 18, 1993; arrived 1923, aged 9. EI Series 285.  
WILLIAMS PRITCHARD MARGARET, born on the island of Anglesey, North Wales, in 1901; interviewed by Paul E. Sigrist Jr., January 31, 1993; arrived 1920, aged 19. EI Series 247.

### ***Other interviews***

GARDINER MARIE, born in the USA in 1925; interviewed by Janet Levine, July 19, 2001. [To Scotland in 1938]  
MACLUSKIE JEAN, born in Elizabeth, New Jersey, USA, in 1929; interviewed by Janet Levine, July 17, 2001. EI Series 1212. [To Scotland in 1931]  
ROBERTS PEGGY, born in Granville, New York, USA, in 1905; interviewed by Paul E. Sigrist Jr., July 30, 1997. EI Series 916. [2<sup>nd</sup> generation Welsh]  
ROGERS WILLIAM (WOLF ROGENSTEIN), born in Poland, in 1902; interviewed by Paul E. Sigrist Jr., April 25, 1991; arrived 1909, aged 7. EI Series 138 [Polish parents; family moved to England when he was about nine months old]  
SEWELL JOHN A., born in East Orange, New Jersey, USA, in 1928; interviewed by Janet Levine, July 20, 2001. EI Series 1215. [Scottish parents. To Scotland when he was 3; talks about his parents' emigration]

## II. Interviews guidelines

Reproduced below the reader will find the Ellis Island Oral History Project question list as well as the sections of the Folklore and Social-Ethnic Studies manuals which provided guidance for the Federal Writers' Project fieldworkers (only the sections concerning the collection of interviews have been reproduced, not the entire manuals).

### 1. Ellis island oral history project interview questions

Revised by Paul E. Sigrist Jr., March 1993. United States Department of the Interior. National Park Service. Ellis Island Oral History Project, New York Statue of Liberty/Ellis Island National Monument.

#### THE START AND THE OLD COUNTRY

Good morning/afternoon, this is \_\_\_\_\_ for the National Park Service. Today is \_\_\_\_\_, the \_\_\_\_\_, and I'm in \_\_\_\_\_, at the home of \_\_\_\_\_, who came from \_\_\_\_\_ in \_\_\_\_\_ when he/she was \_\_\_\_\_ years old. Why don't you begin by giving me your full name and date of birth, please.

What is your maiden name? Spell it, please.

Where were you born? Spell it, please.

What size town? Describe what the town looked like? What was the major industry?

Father's name? (spell it if unusual) Occupation? Describe what he looked like. Describe his personality and temperament. Is there a story about your father that you associate with your childhood?

Mother's name? (spell it if unusual) What was her maiden name? (spell it if unusual) Occupation, if any? Describe what she looked like. Describe her personality and temperament. What were her chores around the house? Is there a story about your mother that you associate with your childhood?

Name all brothers and sisters. (spell if unusual)

Describe your house. What kind of dwelling did you live in? How large? How many rooms? What was it made out of? How was it heated? Was there a garden? What did you grow? What kind of furniture did you have? Was it in or out of town? Did you keep animals? Who else lived in the building?

Who did the cooking in the family? What was your favourite food? Did you help cook? Describe the kitchen. What was meal time like?

Were there other family members nearby, such as grandparents (spell names if unusual). Did you see them often? Were you especially close to someone in your family? Describe where they lived. Please tell any anecdotes about family members.

What was religious life like? What denomination? Was there a nearby house of worship? If so, please describe it. Describe how you practiced your religion in the home. Did you experience any religious persecution or prejudice of any sort?

Describe holiday celebrations (food, music, special activities, gifts, religious observations, etc.)?

Describe school life. Did you go to school? Where was the school? Was it crowded? Do you remember specific teachers or playmates? What was your favorite subject? Did you learn English prior to coming to America?

Describe what you did for entertainment. Describe and explain games that you played. Tell favorite childhood stories.

## COMING TO AMERICA

Who decided to come? Did you know someone who was in America already? Was a family member sending money from America? Describe getting ready to go and getting the proper papers. Did you want to come to America? What did you know about America? How did your mother feel? How did your father feel? Did anyone give you a “good-bye” party?

How much luggage did you pack? What did you take? What did you leave behind? What kind of luggage did you have? Did you take food? Did you take special belongings? If so, what?

Who came to America with you?

## THE VOYAGE

What port did you leave from?

How did you get from your home to this port?

Describe the journey to the port. Tell any stories about this process.

What was the name of the ship? (spell if unusual)

Did you have to wait for the ship once you got to the port? If so, where did you stay? With whom? How long? Describe the experience.

Did any family members see you off?



When did the ship depart? (month and year?)

What were the accommodations like on the ship? What class did you travel? Describe your accommodations? Describe the dining room. What was the food like? Were you allowed on deck? Describe what you saw, heard and smelled.

Was it rough or smooth? Did you or your travelling companions become ill? Tell any anecdotes about the voyage.

## STATUE OF LIBERTY

Describe seeing land for the first time?

Describe seeing the Statue of Liberty for the first time? Did you know what it was? Describe other people's reaction to this experience.

What were your first impressions of seeing New York City from the boat?

## ELLIS ISLAND

How did you get from the ship to Ellis Island?

Describe your impressions of seeing the Ellis Island building for the first time?

Describe your impressions of the inside of the building.

Were you frightened? Were you excited?

Do you remember what you and your travelling companions were wearing when you arrived at Ellis Island?

How did your travelling companions feel about being at Ellis Island?

Was Ellis Island crowded? Was it clean? How were you treated by the staff?

Describe the medical examinations? Where did they do it? How did they do it? Did everyone have the same examination?

Describe some of the people or things you saw at Ellis Island.

Were you detained at Ellis Island? If so, why? How long? Where did you eat? Describe the experience. Where did you sleep? With whom? Describe the accommodations. Any stories you associate with staying at Ellis Island?

How were you entertained while you stayed at Ellis Island?

Who came to meet you? When? How did you leave Ellis Island?

## LIFE IN AMERICA

What were your expectations of America?

Where did you go after you left Ellis Island? What address? What city? How did you get there? Who met you once you got there? Describe the trip to your destination (i.e. train trip, subway ride, taxi, boat, etc.)? Did you see anything you had never seen before?

Describe the apartment or house? How many rooms? How many people lived there? How was it furnished? How was it lit? How was it heated? Was there indoor plumbing? Describe the neighborhood? Who lived there? Did other family members live near by? Did you get along well with your neighbors?

What jobs in America did family members get? Who supported the family? Did you work when you first got here? Did anyone not work? Describe the various jobs?

Did you go to school? Describe the building and class. How did you feel about going to school? Were you treated well by your fellow students? Do you remember any of the teachers? If so, why do you remember him/her? Any stories or anecdotes?

How did you learn English? Describe how you learned English. How difficult was the process? How did your family members learn English? Any stories associated with learning English?

Did you experience bigotry or persecution in America? Any stories or anecdotes.

What was religious life like in America? Did you live near a house of worship? If so, name it and describe it. Who was more religious, your mother or your father? Why?

When did you move from this address? Where did you move to? For how long?

Describe what you did for entertainment.

Describe how your family members (i.e. mother, father, grandparents, etc.) adjusted to life in America? Did anyone return to live in their country of origin? If so, why? Was your family satisfied or dissatisfied with life in America? Describe the individual adjustments of your father and your mother.

Did any family tragedy occur during the years following your coming to America? If so, what? Describe the experience.

Briefly describe the course of your life (i.e. marriage, children, occupation, anecdotes about meeting your spouse, etc.).

## CONCLUSION

Are you happy you came to America? Were your parents (or other pertinent family members) happy they chose to come to America?

(graciously) Well, that's a good place to end this interview. I want to thank you very much for taking the time for us to come out and speak with you about your immigration experience (or some such gracious wrap-up statement, allow them to respond if they choose to).

This is \_\_\_\_\_ signing off with \_\_\_\_\_ on \_\_\_\_\_ the \_\_\_\_\_, for the Ellis Island Oral History Project.

## ***2. Manual for Folklore Studies***

Federal Writers' Project, [n.p.], 1938. Library of Congress. Washington D.C., Manuscript Division, ML3551.F29.

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[...]

#### **VI. Instructions to Field Workers**

##### A. Method of Locating Sources and Making Contacts with Informants

[...]

##### B. Method of Interviewing

1. Do not draw upon your own memory for folklore material, except for supplementary purposes. Remember that you are to make a fresh collection of first-hand material taken down directly from an informant.
2. For successful result, establish a friendly and confidential relation with the informant. Do not cross-examine him, but use these instructions as a guide to be kept in mind and adapted to the specific situation and person.
3. Your method should be to get the informant to talking freely about himself, and in the course of easy, natural conversation let him tell you what he knows. To do this successfully, you should be able to "talk the same language"; that is, converse on subjects and in terms familiar to him. Make him feel important as a collaborator and at the same time make the interview a social occasion and outlet for him. You will soon learn how much folklore material he has and how to get it from him.
4. Avoid skipping about from point to point. In drawing the informant out, also guide him skilfully along so that in progressing you exhaust each topic before leaving it.
5. The people who know folklore are sensitive and intelligent and respond to a sensitive and intelligent approach. Unless from the start your attitude is one of sympathy and respect, your chances of a successful interview are spoiled.
6. Rather than ask directly for certain types of folklore material, let the collection grow out of the interview, naturally and spontaneously.

7. Do not tire the informant. After one hour or so, it is often best to stop. Two or three visits are usually better than one. The rest gives the informant time to jog his memory and you a chance to think of question to ask him.
8. Forget your own preferences or prejudices.
9. Do nothing to antagonize the informant. It is important not to contradict or argue with him.
10. Do not display or fill out forms in the presence of the informant. Fill them out later from your field notes.
11. In addition to oral material two kinds of records are important:
  - (a) The informant may have in his possession manuscript copies of songs or handwritten ledgers, diaries, cook books, and “ballet books” with songs in them. These are valuable not only for their texts but as documents in the history of folk song in America. Inquire after them and borrow them for the purpose of making typewritten or Photostat copies. Where the permission of the owner may be obtained, arrange for the permanent deposit of the originals in the Archive of American Folk Song in the Library of Congress (full credit, of course, being given to the donor).
  - (b) At the close of the interview (not before) ask for a snapshot or for permission to take one.

C. Method of Recording and Submitting Data

1. Take down everything you hear, just as you hear it, without adding, taking away, or altering a word or syllable. Your business is to record, not to correct or improve.
2. Give each song and tale the title by which it is known to the informant.
3. Wherever possible, take down several versions of the same song or tale from the same or more than one informant, for the purpose of checking and comparing the texts.
4. In noting oral material, please observe the following linguistic instructions carefully:
  - (a) Record all obscure and peculiar terms and phrases as heard, then try to determine their meaning and origin. Use as many sources of information as possible, giving the name and address of each informant.

- (b) In noting dialect be faithful to grammar, idiom, typical vowel and consonant sounds, mutilations, and corruptions. (Special instructions for handling special dialects will be sent on request.)
5. Although the field notes are to be submitted without editing by the worker, supervisor, or director, marginal headings may be inserted to indicate the types of material included.
  6. Only typewritten copy should be submitted. One carbon is required with each original.

[...]

### **VIII. Forms for Interviews**

(Original and one carbon required)

#### **Form A Circumstances of Interview**

STATE  
NAME OF WORKER  
ADDRESS  
DATE  
SUBJECT

1. Name and address of informant
2. Date and time of interview
3. Place of interview
4. Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant
5. Name and addresses of person, if any, accompanying you
6. Description of room, house, surroundings, etc.

(Use as many additional sheets as necessary, each bearing the proper heading and the number to which the material refers.)

**Form B**  
**Personal History of Informant**

STATE  
NAME OF WORKER  
ADDRESS  
DATE  
SUBJECT  
NAME AND ADDRESS OF INFORMANT

1. Ancestry
2. Place and date of birth
3. Family
4. Places lived in, with dates
5. Education, with dates
6. Occupations and accomplishments, with dates
7. Special skills and interests
8. Community and religious activities
9. Description of informant
10. Other points gained in interview

(Use as many additional sheets as necessary, each bearing the proper heading and the number to which the material refers.)

**Form C: Text of Interview (Unedited) [...]**

**Form D: Extra Comment [...]**

### **3. *Manual for Social-Ethnic Studies***

Federal Writers' Project, [n.p.], 1938. Library of Congress, Washington D.C., Manuscript Division, US WPA Records, Container A8.

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[...]

### **IV. Nature and scope of the Materials**

The field of social-ethnic studies embraces the history and role of nationality groups in modern industrial society. The aim is to present a composite picture of America in terms of migrations, earning, ways of living, and social and cultural life.

#### **A. Migration**

The group under survey is traced back to the Old Country for the background and causes of migration, including, if possible, the particular locality and a description of local conditions. From the motives of immigration (political, religious, and particularly economic) and the methods of attracting and recruiting immigrants, the story passes to the conditions of the sea voyage and landing. Internal migration (in the United States) is then traced to the point of acquiring occupations and establishing a relatively permanent home – a process involving shifting “foreign quarters” and, in rural areas, the displacement of native stock. Attention is also paid to emigration across our borders to Canada, to Latin America, or back to the Old Country.

Note: Some immigrants will have come as political or religious refugees, but the bulk will have come to escape poverty and in search of a livelihood in the New World.

#### **B. Earning a Living**

The immigrant groups in the area treated are studied for occupational distribution, craft innovations brought from the Old Country, and results of shifts from peasant to industrial life. The major industries are described as to products, methods and processes, craftsmanship, and sales distribution. Labor is studied under the head of wages, hours, conditions of work, employment of women and children, unemployment, and organizations.

Note: An ethnic group may be studied in two ways. 1. In a locality convenient for such a study; i.e., a small community in which the group is an important factor and in which there is a dominant industry. 2. Topically, by treating the group throughout the State under such topics as industry, commerce, institutions, and problems of adjustment. The topical approach is likely to make for repetition and lead into elaborate abstractions. The locality study on the other hand is more fruitful and realistic, as social and cultural conditions are here tied up with conditions of work. In connection with the locality study it should be observed that an important ethnic group will be found in both rural and industrial regions, calling, perhaps, for separate treatment.



### **C. Living Conditions**

This phase of the study is closely tied up with work and wage. It includes such items as income, housing, food, health, and sanitation.

Note: Care should be taken not to interpret a low standard of living as necessarily a carry-over from the Old Country, instead of the product of existing conditions.

### **D. Social and Cultural Life**

The groups are studied for their activities, interests and loyalties, including social, fraternal, and religious organizations, folk culture, press, and arts.

Note: Care should be taken not to overstress the separateness and peculiarities of a group. The aim should be to show how the group functions in the life of the community, through contact; to what extent it varies from the general pattern, through survival of Old World traits; and how it contributes to cultural diversity, through its effect on the community. Even in semi-segregated colonies in larger cities, immigrants (including the "old folks") are in contacts with the larger community life, at work, on the streets, in shops, at the movies, etc., changing the pattern as well as being changed.