

City of Dreams: The 400-Year Epic History of Immigrant New York

Review Number: 2119

Publish date: Thursday, 8 June, 2017

Author: Tyler Anbinder

ISBN: 9780544104655

Date of Publication: 2016

Price: £25.00

Pages: 578pp.

Publisher: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt

Place of Publication: Boston, MA

Reviewer: Jonathan W. Wilson

Although most Americans take pride in being ‘a nation of immigrants’ (a slogan apparently popularized by John F. Kennedy), the process of immigration causes perennial controversy in the United States. That is true even in New York City, which would not exist without it, and which stars in many historical narratives of it. Conveniently, Tyler Anbinder published this ambitious account of immigrant life in New York only weeks before a new president won office partly by fomenting rage against certain kinds of immigrants. As a trade book, *City of Dreams* could hardly have had better timing.

The author aims at a sort of restricted comprehensiveness. *City of Dreams* does cover four centuries of New York immigration. However, Anbinder wisely emphasizes certain periods of activity, devoting almost two-thirds of his text to the long 19th century, and he concentrates on the largest immigrant groups of each era. Even so, his argument sometimes loses clarity. For many readers, that will be a reasonable price to pay for such a wealth of detail. Most of it comes from existing scholarship, including the author’s earlier work, but it also reflects extensive original research, mostly in newspapers.

The book does not attempt to trace Native American migration into Manhattan. Otherwise, it begins as early as it could, with Peter Minuit, a French-speaking Walloon born in what is now Germany, sailing in 1625 under the flag of the Dutch West India Company. Even in its first four decades, New Amsterdam invited a heterogeneous population. Dutch and Walloon settlers, typically arriving as indentured servants, were joined by Jewish refugees from Brazil, and by 1664, 15 per cent or more of New Amsterdam’s people were enslaved Africans. After the Duke of York took control of the colony that year, the English expanded slavery. They also recruited their own immigrants, hoping to dilute Dutch culture, but that ‘Anglicization’ campaign brought diversity as well as Englishness. New residents arrived from the Scottish Lowlands, Ulster, and the West Indies; other parts of Europe supplied colonists like the Huguenots of New Rochelle. Although most came for economic opportunity, New Yorkers – except, of course, Catholics and sometimes Jews – enjoyed relative religious toleration by the beginning of the 18th century. Later, the imperial crisis and the American Revolution played out partly as a struggle among immigrants.

After the Revolution, except for a disruption caused by the War of 1812, the city attracted growing numbers of western Europeans, especially Irish fleeing violence and deprivation. They were coming quickly enough by the 1820s to build distinct ethnic enclaves among the city’s neighborhoods and to become targets for

nativists in the next decade. By 1845, 371,000 people inhabited a city that had held only about 20,000 at the end of the Revolution, yet the most spectacular period of growth had yet to begin. That summer, a fungal blight from the Americas hit Ireland's potato crop, causing famine. By 1860, more than 200,000 Irish immigrants were living in New York, and for a combination of political and economic reasons, almost 120,000 Germans joined them.

Anbinder vividly describes the conditions in which these immigrants lived. He has a gift for assessing lurid scenes with scholarly restraint – questioning, for example, the notion that fever-ridden vessels carrying Irish people across the Atlantic deserve their reputation as ‘coffin ships’ (he returns a mixed verdict) and pointing out that most Irish Americans later summed up their apparently harrowing experiences in positive terms. He does indulge the imagination: the Dutch crossed the ocean with human waste running ‘in small rivers around the feet of the third-class passengers’ (p. 13), much as ‘rivers of vomit might be flowing back and forth across the floor of the steerage quarters’ of ships leaving Liverpool two centuries later (p. 134). In each section, *City of Dreams* devotes considerable space to the ocean passage, including elements of travel one could easily overlook. To learn, for instance, that John Jacob Astor waited aboard a ship for two months in early 1784 when it was trapped in ice near the American shore, doubling the total length of his voyage, drives home the uncertainty of Astor's entire project. Later, the ordeal of the Chinese passengers who swam ashore from the *Golden Venture* in 1993 – some of whom had been in transit for a year, and many of whom were imprisoned by the United States government for years afterward – gives Anbinder some access to a contemporary immigration story that historians so far can only glimpse.

The author also shows great skill when describing the political conflicts that embroiled immigrants. He appreciates the contradictions they faced as vulnerable and marginalized people, noting the paradoxical position in which the sectional crisis of the 1850s placed Germans (who largely opposed slavery but voted for Democrats, often in self-defense against nativism) and pulling no punches when describing the racism exhibited by many unionist Irish Americans. Those contradictions culminated in an anti-black pogrom on the streets of New York in 1863, perpetrated largely by Irishmen who feared that they would be conscripted to fight for what the Catholic archbishop called ‘the philanthropic nonsense of abolitionism’ (p. 235). Anbinder also notes that, although Thomas Nast's campaign in the 1870s to destroy the corrupt machine leader William ‘Boss’ Tweed originated partly in anti-Catholicism, immigrants played leading parts on both sides of the struggle. (Nast himself was from Bavaria.) New York City politics during the 19th century was notoriously byzantine, but Anbinder proves a lucid guide.

When *City of Dreams* turns to the age of so-called new immigration, dominated by Italians and Russian Jews who began arriving in large numbers in the 1880s, the author includes some stories of his own ancestors, notably Froim Leib Anbinder, who came to New York from Russia's Pale of Settlement in 1910. He depicts Froim Leib, a poor clothes-presser, gazing anxiously at photographs of his wife Beyle and their five children, wondering when they would be able to follow him to New York. Inserting these stories among many other vignettes may be predictable, but it works very well as a way to humanize the overall narrative. Similarly effective is the author's discussion of the Statue of Liberty and the origins of Emma Lazarus's famous inscription. Anbinder turns a cliché into a source of insight into the contingent nature of America's ostensible friendliness to ‘huddled masses yearning to breathe free’. It was far from fated that Americans would see immigration as a source of national pride. The Statue of Liberty itself, already under construction by the French, almost did not come to New York at all; the state and federal governments both refused to pay for its pedestal.

In many quarters, indeed, immigrants came to seem only more threatening during the early 20th century. Thousands were rejected for illness or eugenic ‘defects’ at the Ellis Island processing center after it opened in 1892. To fears of contagion, foreign radicalism, and organized crime – concerns not entirely without foundation – the First World War added anxiety about the loyalty of German (and Irish) Americans. After the war, however, these western European immigrants seemed far less threatening than newer groups. The infamous National Origins Act, which set federal policy for 40 years, throttled immigration from other regions of the world. Italy and Russia sent more than half a million people to the United States in 1914; 15

years later, their combined legal quota stood at only 8,586 people per annum. Asian immigrants, already subject to extraordinary restrictions, were prohibited entirely. Until this law's repeal, Anbinder writes, 'immigrants would play a diminishing role in the story of New York,' whose largest immigrant groups were the primary targets (p. 469).

Of course, the story of immigrant New York did not end there. It merely evolved under pressures that again tested the boundaries of national belonging. The phenomenon of illegal immigration came into large-scale existence for the first time during the 1920s, and the Great Migration brought hundreds of thousands of African Americans from the South – another kind of immigration. Meanwhile, tens of thousands of Puerto Ricans, holding American citizenship, came legally to New York during the inter-war period, as did similar numbers of people from elsewhere in the colonial Caribbean, arriving under western Europe's large quotas. Again, there were cruel paradoxes. 'We're American', Italian Americans told interviewers, but Puerto Ricans were dark-skinned, 'lazy,' and 'awful dirty people'. As Anbinder drily observes, 'The Irish had said the exact same things about the Italians only a few years earlier' (pp. 484–5). During the 1930s, Irish Catholics were the core supporters of Father Charles Coughlin's anti-Semitic Christian Front, and in 1939, German Americans held a Nazi rally at Madison Square Garden. It drew 20,000 people, who came to cheer what they called 'true Americanism'.

The Second World War and the Holocaust made overt public expressions of ethnic hatred less respectable. They also increased American sympathy for refugees. However, the relatively liberal quota system established in 1965 by the Hart-Celler Act, which still exists in a modified form, belies the incoherence of both policy and popular attitudes in America. Today, no single nationality dominates the immigrant population in New York to the degree that some did in the past. Immigrants are everywhere, yet most of them lack the mass visibility of their famous predecessors. Even so, they are vulnerable to eruptions of hostility, like what Muslims of various backgrounds reported suddenly facing after the 2001 terror attacks, or what some Latinos experience as targets in contemporary national politics. It seems safe to conclude that old cultural scripts can still please American audiences.

The question is whether *City of Dreams* will change a reader's understanding of the past. To observe that New York owes its character to immigrants is not controversial. Indeed, a history of immigration may be little less than a social history of the city. For the later chapters (covering the 19th and 20th centuries), Anbinder thus tells a story of conflict that most readers will find familiar. Various waves of immigrants came to New York; they arrived mostly poor and ethnically different; they were perceived as threatening; they slowly established themselves through unremitting labor and concerted action in the face of native hostility – as well as by differentiating themselves from newer waves of immigrants. This is a reliable formula for a book about the modern history of New York.

A greater difficulty exists for the first five chapters, which deal with the colonial and revolutionary eras. What Anbinder calls 'immigration' in this section encompasses the experiences of settlers, first-generation slaves, and people of all social classes who migrated (often repeatedly) within the British Empire, as well as people in the latter category who became founders of the American state and its ruling class. In other words, it was the story of almost every type of early New Yorker. That creates both an interpretive and a rhetorical problem.

Historians have come to view port cities during the 17th and 18th centuries as located in an 'Atlantic world' structured primarily by empire rather than nationality. Differences of language, birthplace, and even religion did not necessarily have the same significances they would have in the age of democratic nationalism. Literal definitions aside, therefore, an early modern migrant was not necessarily the same thing, either socially or politically, as a modern immigrant. (The earliest uses of the term immigrant noted in the Oxford English Dictionary are from the 1780s; emigrant is not much older.) Indeed, the concept of citizenship itself should not be taken for granted. It was emerging as the 19th century began, and the modern connotations of immigration are barely intelligible without it.

City of Dreams skips over this problem in a way that strangely weakens Anbinder's overall argument. The book refers to even the earliest European settlers in New Amsterdam as 'immigrants' so that they can be included in the same narrative as later arrivals. Even so, Anbinder's treatment of the early period is good; he draws a complex portrait of the society that the colonists built and which the revolutionaries tore apart, making clear that the modern concept of nationality is of limited use in comprehending it. In other words, the concept of immigration is almost superfluous to Anbinder's story of New York before the 19th century. As a result, City of Dreams seems to be two different books (the first much shorter than the second) joined at the Revolutionary War by an equivocation. Both are fine accounts of the city's development, but the diffuse early chapters dampen the force of the argument Anbinder makes later.

On the other hand, the ultimate political claim of City of Dreams is both controversial and urgent. The author slowly builds a case against a central idea of contemporary American nativist rhetoric: that earlier immigrants were different from today's, assimilating more easily, working harder, respecting the law more, sharing more values with the native population, or being less assertive. Anbinder decisively refutes this notion, at least with respect to New York. If anything, the evidence in City of Dreams suggests the opposite is true. Contemporary immigrants in New York are less embattled and probably less culturally isolated, in most cases, than their predecessors were. Anbinder's conclusions are unlikely to surprise scholars, but it is good to see them published at this moment in such a high-profile book.

Overall, therefore, one may recommend City of Dreams to general readers without hesitation. In addition, the fund of detail in City of Dreams – including statistics as well as anecdotes and life stories – will make it a valuable resource for classroom lecturers and for researchers seeking a general introduction to New York's social and political development. Historians will be grateful that such a synthesis exists, and it is likely to remain a standard work of reference for many years.

Tyler Anbinder wishes to thank Prof. Wilson for his insightful reading of City of Dreams and does not wish to comment further.

Other reviews:

New York Times

<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/06/books/review/city-of-dreams-history-of-immigrant-new-york-tyler-anbinder.html> [2]

Kirkus

<https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/tyler-anbinder/city-of-dreams-400-year-epic/> [3]

Boston Globe

<https://www.bostonglobe.com/arts/books/2016/10/13/immigration-isn-new-issue-but-has-always-been-thorny-and-about-american-dream/x17N3oSIL9YaIH77DO1DuO/story.html> [4]

Source URL: <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/2119>

Links

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/262964>

[2] https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/06/books/review/city-of-dreams-history-of-immigrant-new-york-tyler-anbinder.html?_r=0

[3] <https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/tyler-anbinder/city-of-dreams-400-year-epic/>

[4] <https://www.bostonglobe.com/arts/books/2016/10/13/immigration-isn-new-issue-but-has-always-been-thorny-and-about-american-dream/x17N3oSIL9YaIH77DO1DuO/story.html>