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Sociology, Immigration



Sarah Brownson HIST 195 Immigrant Book Critique “ Where do we go from here? ” This is the question that resounded through most peoples’ heads as they walked through the Golden Gates of Ellis Island into America for the first time. Ellis Island Interviews by Peter Morton Coan does a great job describing the history of Ellis Island and the personal encounters of a fraction of immigrants who passed through in their journey to start a new life. Ellis Island was active from January 1, 1892 to November 12, 1954. During that time, more than 24 million people were processed for immigration into the United States of America. The beginning of this book, Coan gives a very thorough explanation of the history of Ellis Island and what happened there. After the background information comes the many different stories of the personal accounts from the last surviving immigrants who came through Ellis Island. 28 different countries are represented in this book with multiple stories for each country about why each person came to America, their experience coming through Ellis Island, and what happened to them after they assimilated into the American culture. After reading this book, Coan makes it clear why we must be informed about the history of immigration, not only because it is our ancestors, but also because of the similarities to immigration issues today. Ellis Island Interviews is a great book to learn about the history of immigration in America. In the beginning of Ellis Island Interviews, Coan gives a detailed history of Ellis Island from the time it was opened in 1892, to the day it was shut down in 1954. Before Ellis Island, in 1855, an old fort on the Hudson River named Castle Garden became the first established immigration depot. The government felt a depot was necessary to control the millions of Irish arriving in America fleeing the potato famine.

The purpose of Castle Garden was to deny entrance to immigrants considered undesirable. Undesirable immigrants consisted of prostitutes, conmen, lunatics, convicts, Chinese or any person who could not take care of them self. White, northern Europeans were the most desired. However, due to corruption within the employees of Castle Garden, Congress shut it down. Still in need for immigration regulation, the Bureau of Immigration chose a small island a few hundred yards away from the Statue of Liberty as the new receiving station. Ellis Island was established. Shortly after the first immigrant, Annie Moore from Ireland, was admitted through Ellis Island, the same corruption that affected Castle Garden squirmed its way into Ellis Island. Inspectors forced immigrants to pay bribes or provide sexual favors. Railroad ticket agents inflated the price for passage and made a personal profit off the difference. The fraud lasted until 1901, when President Theodore Roosevelt ordered a clean up and replaced all top officials of Ellis Island. Continuing with the history of the island, Coan goes on to explain the structure of Ellis Island and what happened there. Upon the arrival of a steamship, the immigrants on board were taken straight to Ellis Island, where they were carefully tagged with their name and the name of the steamship. The men were then separated from their families and each gender was put through inspection. The first inspection was a medical examination conducted by a physician. They were looking for contagious diseases, disabilities or mental instabilities. The second inspection was an interview in which an inspector asked about 30 questions to each immigrant ranging from name and age to showing at least \$20 to prove they had financial independence. If any of these inspections were failed or if an

immigrant did not have someone in America to vouch for them, immigrants were put in detention, or detained on Ellis Island until they passed inspection or were deported. The second part of Ellis Island Interviews, Coan shares the stories of 114 immigrants who passed through Ellis Island during its heyday. Each chapter represents a different nationality, from Italy to Palestine. Within each chapter, a number of immigrants from that country recount their personal stories. They are the actual stories of the last surviving immigrants who came through Ellis Island told by them personally. Each story describes in detail the life they left behind, the reason they emigrated, what they went through, and what became of them in their life in America. In this book, Coan does not take a stance on whether immigration is good or not. Nor does he take a stance on current immigration issues. I believe Ellis Island Interviews was written simply to inform people on not only the history of immigration in America, but also the history of Ellis Island in general and the people who came through it to America. Coan states today, Ellis Island is romanticized. People feel proud of the “ Wall of Honor” where people have paid to have their ancestors’ names engraved in steel. It is not a bad thing to feel proud of our country’s history, however we as citizens should be aware of not only the good moments, but also the bad. Coan plays no favoritism in this book. He does not glorify the great things that happened on Ellis Island and ignore the bad. In fact, I feel he does more to inform the truth, even if it is hard to hear. He does not sugar coat the history of Ellis Island saying people came through the golden gates, onto the golden paved roads into America, the land of opportunity. Instead he states the facts. There was corruption on Ellis Island. The employees did take advantage of the immigrants enduring them

through verbal, physical and sometimes sexual abuse. Different medical treatments were experimented on immigrants detained, including lobotomies and electroshock therapy. These can be believed to be true because Coan did his research to back up and prove his facts. He interviewed people such as Dr. James Baker, the director of the neuropsychiatric service at Ellis Island in 1949, who admitted to having performed electroshock therapy to patients. Coan used credible references to explain the history of Ellis Island. Even though a lot of it was dark, some of the history is still something to be proud of, and Coan does a great job in showing both sides. Another reason, I feel, Coan wrote *Ellis Island Interviews*, was because people need to remember the events that occurred in not only our country's history, but also the world's history. Our ancestors came to America from many different countries for various reasons, and it is important to understand why they came here. Whether the reason was war or better job opportunities. Coan states in the book that it was important to retrieve and document the stories of the remaining survivors because of their old age. Most survivors were in there one hundred years at the time of the interviews, and because of that, their age had altered their memory. I feel Coan deserves immense admiration for having put this book together and all the research and time put into it because it is important to understand our history and that of our ancestors. There are clearly immigration issues in America today. Illegal immigrants are constantly crossing the borders creating issues with jobs and national security. The issue is pretty much split amongst Americans today. Some feel there is a strong need to control and put a stop to immigrants from coming into the country because they are

stealing jobs away from Americans. Others feel it is not a priority to mandate the borders because most aliens do the jobs Americans do not want to do. There is also the concern of illegal aliens contributing to crime causing an increase in unlawful activities. Using Mexico as an example, some Americans are concerned the current drug wars going on will eventually make their way into the states, if they have not already. All of these concerns Americans have about immigrants today (jobs, money and crime) were the same concerns of Americans in the past when immigrants came through Ellis Island. Coan states that the very same accusations about the Irish and Italians back then, are being said about Hispanic and Asian immigrants today. Because America is notably known as “ the land of the free” many feel it is a great opportunity to come here, whether it be legally or not. There will always be the battle between those who believe we should control the borders and those who do not. Just like back in the early 1900’s when the battle was who was considered undesirable and who was desirable to be admitted through Ellis Island. Through the 62 years Ellis Island was functioning, it impacted many people’s lives. Coan did a great job depicting the history of it all in Ellis Island Interviews. Showing how it is important to understand our history and value our ancestors’ pasts, Coan balanced the good and bad and revealed the truth about the events that occurred. I encourage people to read Ellis Island Interviews because it not only gives a thorough history lesson, but also is a source of entertainment reading the individual stories of real life events.