

David Gwynn
LIS 604 - Dr. James Carmichael
27 July 2009

Book Review:

Jones, Alston Plummer, Jr. *Libraries, Immigrants, and the American Experience*. Westport, Ct: Greenwood Press, 1999.

A primary focus of the study of American immigration history has always been the issues surrounding assimilation and "Americanization" of newcomers. In *Libraries, Immigrants, and the American Experience*, Plummer Alston Jones, Jr., demonstrates the role of public libraries in this process, presenting a history of immigration and library services supported by biographical sketches of four leaders in the field from the late nineteenth century to World War II: Jane Maud Campbell, John Foster Carr, Eleanor Ledbetter, and Edna Phillips. In the process, Jones provides not only an interesting historical narrative, but also valuable context for understanding current debates over assimilation and service even to newer groups of immigrants. The book is divided into two major parts, the first covering the years from 1876-1924, a period of largely unrestricted immigration involving mostly southern and eastern Europeans, and the second discussing the years roughly from 1924 to the end of World War II, when immigrants entering under a new quota system more commonly were from the Americas, or perhaps displaced European Jews during and after World War II. Each portion includes a historical overview supported by two biographical essays, although to some extent the biographies transcend the eras represented.

The first chapter presents a good overview of the "free immigration" period, defined in the text as 1876 to 1924, and of the movements to curtail it, first due to concerns by organized labor and then to residents fearful of "radical politics." These concerns led to the implementation of the National Origins Act of 1924, which discouraged immigration from "less desirable" areas such as southern and eastern Europe and Asia. Conveniently enough, this

second major wave of American immigration coincides rather neatly with the early years of librarianship as a profession, beginning with the founding of the American Library Association (ALA) in 1876, and with the early growth period of publicly funded libraries in general—the Carnegie grants, the growth of library education, Melvil Dewey and other reformers, etc. This wave was distinct from the first as it was larger and more urban in character. It also involved people from a different geographical area, even though this group came for essentially the same political, social, and economic reasons as its predecessors. Jones argues that librarians as a whole responded enthusiastically to this new patron base, at least on a professional level, and provided essential services, if occasionally in what we might now view as a slightly paternalistic or condescending manner.

The story is largely one of outreach. Jones' four biographical sketches paint their subjects under the categories of librarian as advocate, propagandist, social worker, and educator, but librarians serving immigrants during this period arguably had to fill all four roles in order to be effective. One of Jones' central themes is the idea that "Americanization" or assimilation was not even a controversial concept at the time; it was simply assumed to be the ideal (and perhaps the only) course of action, even by most immigrants themselves. Librarians generally tended to agree, seeing themselves as natural facilitators within the process. The mission was to teach English, to educate patrons in the ways of American society, to promote participation in society and citizenship, and to minimize the impact of unscrupulous people and politicians who would prey upon immigrants. The latter issue was particularly important to Jane Maud Campbell, herself an immigrant; Campbell wanted to educate newcomers before they had the chance to be manipulated. The specific areas of controversy or of concentration cited by Jones sound very familiar today in light of service to Latino and other recent immigrants: the hiring of librarians who speak a foreign language, the decision whether or not to provide foreign language materials, the placement of branch

locations, and the issue of assistance with government and social services. Today's public librarians might be surprised to see how large a role home visits and very specific individual involvement played in this early outreach; librarians were concerned not only with reading and education, but with such seemingly unrelated matters as hygiene. This too may strike some modern day readers as rather paternalistic, although it may be somewhat understandable in light of sanitary conditions related to unprecedented urban population growth.

Particularly contentious at the time, though, was the issue of foreign language materials. There was some sense that providing such materials was detrimental to the learning of English. Campbell and Eleanor Ledbetter disagreed strenuously, and were strong supporters of actively collecting foreign language titles, and of creating extensive bibliographies, the assumption being that many first generation immigrants would never become proficient enough in English to learn basic American survival skills in that language. Jones cites Ledbetter's comments on how she would be forced to "give up reading" (p. 152) if the only options she were offered after working eight to ten hours a day were in a second language. This echoes in some ways the lack of general support for libraries in working class communities also expressed in Robert Sydney Martin's *Carnegie Denied*; workers found themselves with only so much leisure time and reading approved literature—in whatever language—was a lesser priority. The issue of foreign language materials is one that still resonates today, as many American libraries were caught unprepared (perhaps even by design in some cases) for an influx of Spanish-speaking immigrants in recent years.

On the issue of foreign language materials, John Foster Carr seemed most interested in avoiding the accidental acquisition of subversive materials. Carr is presented in the book as something of a paradox in many ways. Despite his rather stereotype-laden and patronizing guide for new immigrants, with its admonitions to minimize what he perceived to be cultural

behavioral differences, the author characterizes Carr's work with the ALA Committee on Work with the Foreign Born (CWFB) as a period of relative tolerance for cultural diversity. His rather fierce patriotism, his paranoia over Communism, and his bias against Japanese immigrants also contrast with his general belief that the immigration quota system of 1924 was misguided and what Jones states was his generally liberal respect for diversity.

After 1924, the rules changed for immigrants and librarians. Chapter 5 presents an overview of trends in the wake of the National Origins Act of 1924, the initial result of which was a dramatic increase in the proportion of immigrants arriving from Mexico, Canada, and other parts of the Americas. During World War II, displaced Jews from Eastern Europe faced problems that were somewhat different from their predecessors fifty years before; many were skilled professionals, and the factory jobs that had employed an earlier generation were neither as plentiful nor as appropriate. Jones presents the post-1924 period of restricted immigration as a somewhat changed environment with the new group of immigrants having different needs and librarians offering more of a focus on adult education in general. Although many aspects of service were a continuation of earlier programs and goals, Jones offers the concept of "internationalization" as the replacement for the more assimilation-oriented views of the past.

Particularly interesting is the idea presented in chapter five that internal migration (e.g. rural African Americans from the South or whites from Appalachia moving to northern manufacturing centers) posed challenges very similar to those of immigrant populations, particularly in places like Pittsburgh and St. Louis. This trend would be a very interesting topic for further study, and helps demonstrate why adult education came to the forefront of library services during this period. Jones cites the needs of second-generation immigrants who had already learned English, as well as those of displaced Europeans who were unable to find employment comparable to what they had in Europe as well. The chapter on Edna Phillips

provides information on many of the issues related to adult education, as does the material on Eleanor Ledbetter, particularly on her outreach to schools.

Although the era of immigration studied in *Libraries, Immigration, and the American Experience* was largely urban in character, Jones notes at the beginning of the chapter on John Foster Carr that it was not entirely so. That immigrants who settled in rural areas are mentioned only in passing could perhaps be seen as something of a weakness. While Jones does not state any assumption that his book will provide insight or context into current issues surrounding library service to immigrants, it is almost impossible to read it without seeing certain connections. Some discussion of how (or if) the profession met the needs of those immigrants who landed in Midwestern farm communities might offer some basis for examining service to today's Mexican and Central American newcomers who often settle in rural and small town locations rather than urban ones. There is some discussion of the first wave of Mexican immigrants to California, but mostly in the context of migrant workers. Again, though, this is not really part of Jones' thesis, so its absence from a very well researched book should not be judged harshly.

One other anecdote seems strikingly familiar when viewed from a modern perspective. The disgruntled librarian to whom the library seemed "not a place of learning, not a place to increase the intelligence of the community, but rather a place for the poverty-stricken and the outcast" (p.150) sounds not unlike a public librarian of 2009 concerned about the homeless and unemployed immigrants clustered in any urban public library. Eleanor Ledbetter's response that librarianship is "the finest kind of social work" bears repeating as does the idea of her idea of the library as a community center.

Libraries, Immigration, and the American Experience is a fascinating read for those interested in immigration history or in library services to immigrants, past or present.