

Letters from the Promised Land. Swedes in America 1840-1914, ed. by H. Arnold Barton. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press for the Swedish Pioneer Historical Society. 1975. pp. viii, 344.

This book is not just for Swedes. It is a compelling panorama of American life, as observed by people who had travelled the world and had sharpened their powers of observation. A pastor's son writes from Lyons, Iowa, in 1858, that he was becoming Americanized: thin as a skeleton, deeply tanned from the hot sun, teeth pitch-black from tobacco. Who could draw a more deft portrait of the pioneer? This young man had, however, introduced one Swedish custom: "The Americans always drink coffee and tea with their meals and feed milk to the pigs because they think milk is not healthy. I have taught them to drink milk . . ."

Another man, writing home to Sweden from Jefferson County in 1864, cannot stay on the farm in Iowa when gold is to be had in Idaho. His niece remarks some months later that "they are not mining much gold. Uncle is bothered with backache," and they intend to return to Jefferson County in the fall.

Iowa was a lush land in Swedish eyes. One woman wrote that they had good bread, beef and pork, eggs and milk in abundance, cherries, apples, and had made a barrel and a half of maple syrup in the fall, adding that "when I compare Sweden with this country, I have no desire to return."

Our gold prospector was also a sportsman. He did not think much of the fishing in southeastern Iowa, but "wild turkeys, prairie chickens, partridges, geese and rabbits are everywhere. . . . You may be sure the boys are good marksmen."

Another poor Swede had intended to come to relatives in Iowa, but he and eleven countrymen were waylaid by a smooth talking gentleman in New York, and they ended as laborers in tidewater Virginia, which they had been told was not far from Iowa. "Yes, the slaves are freed, but we are treated almost like slaves." This was in 1865. On another social level, a Swedish governess in South Carolina before the Civil War had been shocked by the behavior of southern gentlemen, who "sit and rock on their chairs, put their feet up on chairs, tables, benches, indeed even on window sills . . ." One day, a Dr. Sloan came to call. He sat down on the sofa beside the lady of the house "and

said: 'I must sit here beside you so I can spit out the window.' What do you think of that? And he was one of the most distinguished gentlemen of that place!"

Not all the Swedes were models of decorum. The record for procrastination has to go to one of them, a young man who ran away to sea in 1858 and was never heard from again. Then a letter arrived from Hawaii in 1889, written in a mixture of Swedish, Norwegian and English. He had sailed the seven seas, finally settling down as overseer on a sugar plantation. "Like almost all sailors I have never married and therefore have no children. . . . your son, Jóns."

Some immigrants were radicalized by kicking around the great new continent, but most of the socialists, full of dialectical energy, brought their radical views with them. One of them wrote in 1912 to comrades back home in Sweden that the majority of immigrants have stared themselves blind at the dollar and "forgotten that they are workers, slaves under capital. Indeed, some of those who in the old country were links in the great international chain of brotherhood have, since they came here, deserted our cause, have scrambled up onto the backs of their comrades and have been thrown into bourgeois society, are bigwigs in the Patriotic Society, etc."

By this time, it should be apparent that this is a book of unusual vitality. It is every bit as compelling as a good novel and is well worth reading for its insight into the human predicament alone. The close to two hundred letters and other documents are translated into clear and flowing English, which adds to the pleasure of the reader, though the editor feels that it sometimes varnishes over the rough, outlandish vigor of the originals.

This book is more than a collection of engrossing glimpses into individual lives. The editor has made it more than that. As editor of the *Swedish Pioneer Historical Quarterly*, he has deep knowledge of Swedish American history, but he is also trained in European history and has published a book on eighteenth century Europe within the past year. He understands the background to immigration as well as the phenomenon itself, and he is thoroughly at home in both Swedish and English. This exceptional knowledge of the subject has found its expression in the richness and variety of the source materials chosen for publication, in the grace of the translations, and in a series of editorial

commentaries which are consistently thoughtful, elegant and inobtrusively erudite.

Barton divides his material into three parts, "The Pioneers, 1840-1864," "The Great Farmer-Land in the West, 1865-1889," "Farm, Forest and Factory, 1890-1914." For each part, he writes a concise introductory essay of ten or twelve pages, summarizing the major trends of Swedish American development during the period. Taken as a whole, together with the Epilogue, these essays comprise a brief, judicious history of the Swedes in America.

Since they deal with ethnic communities on the level of individual interrelationships, these essays have relevance for other groups on the move as well, be they Yankees, Quakers, Utopians, migrants from Ohio, or other immigrants from abroad. Barton's essays and the supporting documents act as a model, a paradigm, of the process by which this North American continent was filled up with people, how they made contacts by letter and courier through networks of family and acquaintances, moved from colony to colony of their own kind, out of Illinois into Iowa, out of Iowa into Nebraska and Kansas, off to the gold fields and back again, and how they established their own churches and press and social and occupational organizations, interacted with other groups, changed their ethnic patterns and folkways, and in other ways, stayed the same.

The book is sturdily bound, which is somewhat unusual nowadays. It is well illustrated with contemporary materials from Sweden and America. It has a careful index, sparse but useful footnotes, and a good bibliography.

Don't miss this book. It will fascinate anybody who wants to relive and to understand the process by which this continent, and especially the Midwest, was filled with people of diverse origins, people who moved about as communities and families, not as individuals.

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