

Selections from *America & England Contrasted, or, The Emigrants Handbook and Guide to the United States* 2nd ed. (1842) pp. 12–3, 36–7.

This book consisted largely of encouraging accounts by emigrants to America of their personal experiences. The first here is by a Mr. Buckingham, who wrote about his time in upstate New York. Although the actual influence of such emigrant handbooks has been questioned by scholars, there is no doubting their popularity, at least as measured by the number published (Erickson 35).

“In the general appearance of the surface of the country, England is far superior to America. The great perfection to which every kind of cultivation has there attained; the noble mansion of the wealthy gentry; the fine parks and lawns; the beautiful hedge-row fences; the substantial stone farm houses and out-buildings, and the excellent roads and conveyances which are seen in almost every part of England, are not to be found here. But though in these outward appearances, American farming districts are inferior to England, yet in all the substantial realities the superiority is on the side of America.

“In America, the occupier of a farm, whether large or small, is almost invariably the owner, and the land he cultivates, he can therefore turn to what purpose he considers it the most fitted for – hence all the disagreeable differences between landlords and tenants – the raising of rents, after expensive and laborious improvements; or ejectments for voting at an election, or interference in parochial affairs, in a way not pleasing to the lord of the soil – together with the interference of clerical magistrates, so fertile a source of annoyance in England, are here unknown. There being no tithes here, great or small, for the support of a state clergy, all that large class of troubles growing out of tithe disputes and tithe compositions, are here unheard of. The labourers being fewer than are required, and wages being high, there are neither paupers nor poors’ [*sic*] rates, and neither workhouses nor goals [*sic*] are required for the country population, since abundance of work and good pay prevent poverty, and take away all temptation to dishonesty. There being no ranks or orders, such as the esquire or baronet, the baron and the earl, the marquis and the duke, each to compete with, and outvie the other in outward splendour, which so often lends to inward embarrassment as in England, the country residents are free from foolish ambition which devours the substance of so many at home. ... The consequence is, that

with more source of pleasure and fewer of dissatisfaction, the American country gentry and farmers are much better off, and much happier than the same class of people in England, and in short scarcely anything ever occurs to ruffle the serenity of a country and happy life in the well settled parts of America.

“If the contrast is striking between the American and English farmer, it is still more so between the farm labourers of the two countries. In England it is well known what miserable wages the farm labourers receive, ten to twelve shillings perhaps the average.” (The highest it should be.) “What scanty fare they are obliged to subsist upon. Flesh meat once or twice a week at the most! And how perpetually they stand in danger of the workhouse, with all their anxiety and strife to avoid it; with no education themselves, and no desire to procure any for their children. Here (America) there is not a single labourer on the farm who receives less than a dollar a day, or twenty-four shillings per week, while many receive more; and those that are permanently attached to the farm receive that sum or equal to it throughout the year. And where they are resident on the farm, they have as good living as prosperous tradesmen in the middle ranks of life enjoy in England. Three substantial meals a day, and in hay and harvest time four, with abundance and variety at each. ...

“The consequence is, that the farm labourers and their families are well fed, well dressed, well educated in all the ordinary elements of knowledge, intelligent in conversation, agreeable in manners, and as superior to the corresponding class in England as all those advantages can indicate. ...

“The greatest difference of all, however, between the agricultural population of England and that of America, is to be seen in their relative degrees of intelligence. In England, none, I presume, will deny the fact of the farmers and farm labourers being among the least intelligent and most uneducated portion of the population; here, on the contrary, they are among the most informed. A great number of the occupiers of farms are persons, who having been successful in business in cities, have retired at an early period of life, bought an estate, take delight in cultivating it on their own account for income, and as from four to ten per cent. is realised on farming capital where carefully attended to, it is at once a safe and profitable investment.

“These gentlemen having a good deal of leisure, little parish business to attend to, and a taste for books and love of information, read a great deal more than the busy inhabitants of commercial cities, and have the power of exercising their judgment and reflection more free from the bias of party views and sectarian feelings, than those who live in large commercial cities. Their previous education and ample means dispose others also to works of benevolence, and the consequence is that while their conversation is more intelligent, and their manners greatly superior to the English farmers generally, they devote a large portion of their time and means to the establishment of Sunday schools, district schools, societies for mutual improvement, country libraries, temperance societies, savings” banks; and, in short, everything that can elevate those below them, and make them happier in their stations. ...

“The Mechanic’s and Labourer’s Guide” has some statements on the situation in which a mechanic with a large family is placed, which we deem most important to be generally known. It states that:

“In America, whatever be the extent of a man’s family, and whether girls or boys, they will not be found the very heavy burthen they too frequently are in old countries. Except in the difficulty of getting them over there, number will be no disadvantage, owing to the constant demand there is for their services. It is the custom to send children out to employment at the early age of nine or ten years, and very desirable situations, with fair remuneration, may readily be obtained for them. It is plain, therefore, that they are likely to be a benefit rather than an incumbrance to the parent so soon as they are at all able to be employed. There may be said to exist also a prejudice in favour of “old country” children, the same as for adult help, particularly in the case of females. In advertising for female aid, a customary plan upon most occasions is to specify that English or American would be preferred, or that none other need apply. Girls from the age of eleven and twelve are sought after as day-helps, either to nurse children or attend about house, getting from half a dollar to a dollar a week and board, while the adult female help, (there are no servants in America) will get from five to eight dollars a month and every necessary. Girls are also early employed in trades. In all employment which comes within the province of the needle, there is a great demand for them, not. withstanding their being already so numerous. ...

This last summer there have been about six hundred new houses built in Cincinnati, as large fine houses as you can see in England, most of them brick, and some few with stone fronts, but all of them covered with shingles, that is small split boards. There is a beautiful boat landing, paved with stone, with a regular descent from the great freshes that come down the river Ohio; there is no tide, We have good works that carry water all over the city, but poor people have to pay dear for it. This Is a fine place for hogs, there have been thirty thousand killed this winter for the pork houses, where they barrel it up and send it to the seaports; we can take a basket and go to the slaughter-houses and get as many pig-hearts and lights as we please for nothing. Hosiers and basket- makers are very scarce; I wish many times my poor neighbours were here for the sake of having plenty of food, but I don't want one to come thinking of getting a living without working. ...