Giving Voice to Immigrants, Past and Present

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Body

Ambivalence about immigration is as American as, well, corned beef, pizza, knishes, black-eyed peas, empanadas -- and apple pie. Which is why "Toward a Better Life: America's New Immigrants in Their Own Words -- From Ellis Island to the ***Present***" (Prometheus Books, $26) is a welcome reminder that the vast majority of today's newcomers are tomorrow's productive citizens and that they gravitate here for the same reasons their predecessors did for centuries; some of them even become the antiforeigners of the future.

The author, Peter Morton Coan, writes that his collection of oral histories is "a moving elegy of the human longing for freedom," the "ultimate reality show" that provides a "poignant meditation on the ebb and flow of the hopes and dreams of immigrants everywhere who decided to gamble it all and come to America in their quest for a better life."

Until the mid-19th century, illegal immigration was virtually nonexistent because the Golden Door was wide open, writes Barry Moreno, the National Park Service historian at Ellis Island, in the book's foreword. Then came a flood of Catholics, Jews, Eastern Orthodox and Chinese, which prompted mostly Protestants, in a rare alliance with organized labor, to raise the bar. ("I die a true American," were the dying words -- in "Gangs of New York" and in real life -- of William Poole, known as Bill the Butcher, who was born to parents of English descent and himself an immigrant from New Jersey, when he was killed in Lower Manhattan in 1855 by a young Irishman.)

Next year, a Peopling of America Center, an expansion of the immigration museum on Ellis Island, will open to reflect the full range of American immigrants, from Native Americans to the latest arrivals. In the preface to "Toward a Better Life," Stephen A. Briganti, president of the Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation, writes that, like this book, the new National Museum of Immigration will go beyond traditional history to introduce "America's new immigrants, get a rare look inside their lives, and perhaps a glimpse of our future."

Allan Ishac dedicates the sixth edition of his indispensable guide, "New York's 50 Best Places to Find Peace and Quiet" (Universe, $14.95), to those devoted stewards of the city "who commit time and energy to creating wonderful new places to find refuge, retreat and renewal." He adds: "This may be the city that never sleeps, but thanks to them, we're all able to rest for a while."

Few people associate peace and quiet with New York City. Yet in this book (and on his iPhone application called TranquiliCity), Mr. Ishac, a former advertising creative director who relaxes by making balloon sculptures, has compiled an impressive list of urban sanctuaries, some familiar and some virtually undiscovered.

"We all love New York's energy and pace," he writes, "but we also realize that every hour of nonstop action calls for a few minutes of sanity-restoring calm."

The politically incorrect epithet "Indian giver" can be traced to the common practice among Native Americans who often occupied land temporarily and traded reciprocal rights to live and hunt there with other tribes. Hence the

enduring cultural misunderstanding over the 1626 "sale" by the Canarsee Indians of an island -- later known as Manhattan -- which may have been actually owned by the Mereckawiecks.

The Canarsees did, however, claim large tracts of Brooklyn, one of which was sold by Chief Gauwane and became known as Gowanus, dominated by the canal, which was widened from a natural creek in the 19th century to accommodate bulk cargoes carried on the Erie Canal.

"The Glory of Brooklyn's Gowanus: Legacy, Industry, Artistry" (Walsworth, $40) is a spellbinding retrospective, punctuated by maps, historic prints and photographs, in which Leslie-Arlette Boyce and Brian Merlis celebrate a gritty neighborhood that is once again poised for a metamorphosis.

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Graphic

PHOTO: German immigrants, 1925. (PHOTOGRAPH BY N.P.S./STATUE OF LIBERTY NATIONAL MONUMENT)

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