

From America to Norway: Norwegian-American Immigrant Letters, 1838–1914, volume 1, 1838–1870

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their Ojibwe neighbors—William, Isabella, Nindipins, and others—began to matter to me.

I look forward to passing this book on to an Ojibwe friend who will find some familiar names here and who, because she is a Protestant pastor herself, will appreciate the individuals portrayed in these journals who sought to make sense of worldviews that were changed by the tumult of the era and their cross-cultural friendships.

From America to Norway: Norwegian-American Immigrant Letters, 1838–1914, volume 1, 1838–1870, edited and translated by Orm Øverland. Northfield, MN: Norwegian-American Historical Association, 2012. 472 pp. References. \$50.00 hardcover.

Reviewer L. DeAne Lagerquist is professor and chair of the department of religion at St. Olaf College. She is the author of *In America the Men Milk the Cows: Factors of Gender, Ethnicity and Religion in the Americanization of Norwegian-American Women* (1991).

Having traveled from Norway to America by boat and then overland by various means (including train, canal boat, or ox-cart), the authors of the letters published here used words to reach back across the Atlantic. Some letters are filled with details of the journey: route, company, and experiences. Others recount the conditions and activities of their lives in the United States, mostly in the upper Midwest. In 1845 a group recently arrived in Rock Prairie, Wisconsin, announced their intention to stay through the winter but then to “go west to a country called Iowa that has recently been purchased from the Indians and taken into the Union as a state.” Their decision was based on lower land prices in Iowa and reports that “in Iowa the water is healthier and there is a better balance of forest and prairie” (64).

The volume reviewed here is the first of a projected four-volume set containing English translations of *Fra Amerika til Norge* (1992–2011), a seven-volume collection already available in Norwegian. It continues the Norwegian-American Historical Association’s long involvement in collecting, preserving, and publishing immigrant letters. Organized chronologically, the letters are identified by their author(s) and recipient(s) and their locations. Following the letter, a brief note provides additional information about the people, their circumstances, or the history of the letter itself, explaining, for example, relationships or tracing the letter’s path into a newspaper or archival collection. Some readers will find familiar correspondents—perhaps their forebears or their neighbors’. A few writers, such as Elise Waerenskjold, may be known from their previously published letters (*The Lady with*

the Pen: Elise Wærenskjold in Texas [1961]). A single letter or even a fragment is all there is from some authors; from others there is a series extending over several years. Although this volume lacks an index, a cumulative index is planned. In the meantime, the detailed table of contents enables readers to select letters on the basis of location, author, or recipient.

Simply dipping into the letters, as if having discovered them in one's attic, offers the almost guilty pleasure of reading someone else's mail. It allows us to travel through time, rather than across an ocean, and provides us with entrance into the daily lives of an earlier wave of immigrants. Straightforward accounts of the price of coffee and crop yields, of family matters and religious disputes, give access to ordinary lives in the midst of much that was new to writers and their intended readers. Announcements of misfortune and death, often reported long after their occurrence, move us decades later. Although each letter is unique, readers can become lost in the particulars, overcome by the trees and missing the forest.

A respected historian of Norwegian American life, Orm Øverland provides the antidote to such disorientation in his informative, insightful introduction. He locates our reading in the period and suggests reading strategies appropriate to the writers' circumstances and intentions. For example, he alerts us to the economics of international correspondence and to the shift from immigrant letters as largely public to routinely private in about 1870. (Respect for correspondents' privacy determined the collection's end point, 1914.) Øverland's discussion of many immigrants' limited experience expressing themselves in writing adds nuance to common assertions about the high literacy rate among Scandinavians. It also illumines both the content and style of the letters, suggesting that the more formal language used to discuss religion echoed what they heard in church. Finally, he balances his estimation of the letters' historical value with their wisdom and insight about the unfolding of life in any time or place.

Across God's Frontiers: Catholic Sisters in the American West, 1850–1920, by Anne M. Butler. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012. xxi, 423 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$45.00 hardcover.

Reviewer Timothy Walch is director emeritus of the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library. He is the author of *Catholicism in America: A Social History* (1989).

It is not hard to make the case that Catholic women religious, better known as sisters or nuns, were among the most "liberated" women in nineteenth-century America. They lived together in common cause