American Passage The History of Ellis Island
By Vincent J. Cannato | HarperCollins | 487 pages; $17.99

On January 1, 1892, 15-year-old Annie Moore from County Cork, Ireland, became a footnote in American history. Accompanied by her little brothers, Anthony and Philip, she stepped across the gangplank of the barge John E. Moore and became the first immigrant to enter the United States through Ellis Island. The $10 gold piece commissioner John Weber gave her to commemorate the occasion, Annie said, was the largest amount of money she had ever seen. Reunited with her father, she began her new life on the Lower East Side of Manhattan.

From 1892 to 1924, 12 million men, women and children arrived at Ellis Island. Unlike Annie, the vast majority of them were natives of Southern and Eastern Europe. Although many Americans condemned them as "scum," 80 percent of the new immigrants passed through the Ellis Island gates within a few hours.

In American Passage, Vincent Cannato, a professor at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, provides a popular history of the little island that became the nation's premiere inspection station. His book is filled with the inspiring - and infuriating - stories of the "birds of passage" and the bureaucrats they encountered.

His analysis, however, does not stray very far from conventional wisdom. Before the imposition of restrictive national quotas in the 1920s, Cannato reminds us, policy makers agreed on the need to accept immigrants. Their debates concerned how to identify and reject those deemed undesirable. "In practice," he writes, this meant three decades of continuous immigration, "at levels that remain historic highs in American history."

American Passage is at its best documenting the autonomy of administrators in "the legal twilight zone" at Ellis Island. Although inspection stations were "physically within our boundaries," Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote, immigrants there did not even have the rights of noncitizens living in the United States.

In case after case, Cannato demonstrates, immigration officials made full use of the vagueness of categories of exclusion such as "mental defectiveness," "moral turpitude" and "contagious or loathsome diseases." Commissioner Robert Watchorn, for example, sent 42-year-old Schimen Coblenz back to Lithuania because he had psoriasis. Although the skin condition was not contagious, he insisted that it was "loathsome" because Coblenz was a butcher. Had he been a factory worker, Watchorn opined, he would have been admitted.

To protect the republic from "riffraff," commissioner William Williams stretched his power to keep out anyone "likely to become a public charge" into a "humane notice" that immigrants must arrive at
Ellis Island with $25 and a railroad ticket to their destination. Although the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society forced Williams to back down, Cannato indicates that the commissioner found new tools of exclusion, focusing on immigrants, many of them Jews, who possessed "poor physiques" or "low vitality."

Cannato notes that by stoking hostility to "hyphenates" (especially German-Americans), aliens and radicals, World War I strengthened the hand of advocates of immigration restriction. In 1924 Congress set a ceiling of 287,000 immigrants per year, allocating a quota of 2% for each nationality based on the population in 1890 (when Northern Europeans were more dominant). The quota for Italians dropped from 40,000 a year to 3,845; the Russian quota from 34,000 to just 2,248. The law, exacerbated by the Great Depression, meant that in 1932 three times as many people left the United States as arrived in it.

Ellis Island's decline - from inspection center to cell for unwanted aliens - is a less familiar story, and Cannato tells it well. In 1942, he reveals, Metropolitan Opera star Ezio Pinza was detained there for three months while the FBI investigated baseless allegations that he was a Nazi sympathizer. In 1950, at the height of the Cold War, actor George Voskovec was held for more than 10 months because Czech authorities had allowed him to leave his native land legally, "setting off alarm bells as to his political sympathies." Upon his release, Voskovec blasted Ellis Island as "a disgusting place, a prison." A few years later, he would appear in the iconic film American about justice, *12 Angry Men.*

In 1954, US attorney-general Herbert Brownell shut down Ellis Island. With a mere 5% of Americans claiming foreign birth, almost no one noticed. The last detainee, Cannato implies, served as an appropriate anticlimax. Arne Peterssen wasn't really an immigrant. The Norwegian seaman had overstayed his shore leave. Authorities released him with a promise that he would rejoin his ship and go home.

But what goes around comes around. Riding the wave of ethnic pride in the 1970s, Ellis Island, Cannato writes, became "entrenched in the nation's psyche and historical memory." After years of restoration, it opened in 1990 as an immigration museum, complete with replicas of the original buildings.

Though he wasn't all that sympathetic to immigrants, Henry James, it turns out, had it almost exactly right. After visiting the inspection center more than a century ago, the great novelist called Ellis Island "a drama that goes on, without a pause, day by day and year after year, this visible act of ingurgitation on the part of our body politic and social, and constituting really an appeal to amazement beyond any sword-swallowing or fire-swallowing circus."

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