Review: 'City of Dreams: The 400-year History of Immigrant New York,' by Tyler Anbinder

NONFICTION: An engaging account of immigrant New York, filled with stories of folks who have made our country great.

By GLENN C. ALTSCHELDER Special to the Star Tribune  |  DECEMBER 16, 2016 — 2:32PM

“Read this Letter,” Irish immigrant James Murray wrote to his former minister in County Tyrone in 1737, “and tell aw [all] the poor folk of your place that God has open’d a door for their deliverance; for there is ne [no] scant of bread [bread] here.”

Over four centuries, Tyler Anbinder, a professor of history at George Washington University, reminds us, millions of men and women, well-known and heretofore forgotten, have expressed the same sentiment. In “City of Dreams,” an enlightening and engaging history of immigration in New York, America’s iconic point of entry, he tells their stories — and documents the role they played in making this country great.

Anbinder does not offer a new interpretation of immigration. And “City of Dreams” starts slowly. In chapters on the 17th and 18th centuries, Anbinder focuses on a few unrepresentative folks and makes the questionable claim that immigrants of means were the rule rather than the exception. When he turns to the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries, however, his book comes alive, taking on a “you are there” immediacy and then stepping back to present the big picture.

Before 1803, Anbinder indicates, ships were not required to feed passengers. Gotham Court, the infamous mid-19th-century tenement, we learn, crammed 800 “wretched looking Irish people” into 120 two-room apartments. Despite these hardships (according to one observer, the average Irish immigrant lived only six years after landing), Anbinder reports, the Famine Irish believed they were far healthier in New York than Ireland — and contrasted the free government, just laws and equal rights in their adopted country with “tyranny and persecution at home.”

Because it was illegal for Russian Jews to emigrate at the end of the 19th century, Anbinder reveals, they paid enormous sums to smugglers to avoid border guards. Thousands of Italians and Jews were turned away at Ellis Island when officials concluded they were sick, illiterate, had “poor physiques” or were likely “to become a public charge.”

During the Great Depression of the 1930s, Anbinder writes, for the only time in our history, more people left the United States than entered it. And he documents the profound impact of the Hart-Cellar immigration reform act of 1965, which abolished the quota system based on nationalities and changed the ethnic makeup of immigration.

Surprisingly, perhaps, Anbinder is optimistic about the future of immigration. Today, he reports, 37 percent of New York’s residents are immigrants (many of them Dominicans, Chinese, Mexicans and South Asians). They are more conversant with America’s history and its values than their predecessors.

Anbinder acknowledges that anti-immigrant sentiment waxes and wanes, but he maintains that “nativist parties no longer exist” and Americans are more accepting of immigrants than they have ever been.

Has he changed his mind, one wonders, in the months since he finished his book?

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