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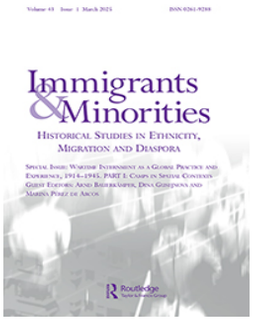

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The Scottish State and European Migrants, 1885-1939

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BOOK REVIEW

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The Scottish State and European Migrants, 1885–1939,

Terence McBride, Cham, Palgrave, 2024, 207pp., £119.99 (hardcover), ISBN 978 3 031 45422 6, £95.50 (eBook), ISBN 978 3 031 4542 9

Much of the literature on British immigration history focuses on England, with other parts of the British Isles often being tackled as mere addenda. This book is thus a welcome addition to the growing historiography on migration to Britain, both in its geographical focus and its methodological approach. Mostly based on government and other official sources, it argues that the sub-state character of Scotland requires a distinct approach to understanding the presence of European migrants in Scotland. Applying the broad brush of 'migration to the United Kingdom' does not, according to the author, do justice to the specific evolution of migration management and migrant identities north of the border. The book is therefore not a fully fledged immigration history but rather pursues the narrower lens of the state-migrant relationship and the way this shaped minority communities between 1885 and 1939. While the start date is well explained as a time where both migration and the Scottish state machinery expanded, the end date would have required some justification. This is not least because continuing the study into the Second World War would have allowed for comparisons with the First World War, and thus broader conclusions of 'alien' treatment in states of emergency.

The four main categories of European migrants included Italians, Lithuanians, Jews from the Russian Pale of Settlement, and Germans. They predominantly settled in the industrial and urban south where they developed a vibrant ethnic life, both secular and religious. Their contact with the authorities was in a variety of forms, from challenge to social and religious norms (Italian ice cream vendors; Jews) to criminals, from welfare recipients to potential carriers of disease, from interned 'enemy aliens' during the First World War (Germans) to trade unionists, and many more. These contacts were managed by a state machinery which included the Scottish Office and the Secretary for Scotland in enacting the stipulations of the Aliens Act of 1905. In tandem with increased authority for the Secretary for Scotland, semi-autonomous supervisory boards based in Edinburgh assumed authority over defined areas of public policy, including those regarding 'foreigners'.

The study makes much productive use of the records of these boards, arguing that Scottish legal traditions in combination with Calvinist and Enlightenment ideas of the 'common good' had an imprint on how the authorities north of the border understood 'foreignness' and dealt with immigration. The point about distinctiveness is well made, although it would have been useful to broaden the analytical framework and ask

where, on balance, the treatment of immigrants was actually *different* from that in England. Where was the Scottish approach more benign and tolerant, and where was it more restrictive? A similar point can be made about the chapter on migrant identities. This is exclusively based on secondary sources and rightly states hybrid identities amongst Scotland's European foreigners. In a theoretical sense, hybridity is specific to immigrant communities around the world and has been amply discussed in the literature on migration. In which way, then, did the Scottish host environment have an impact on hybrid identities which were notably different from those in England? How does distinctiveness – a term that is used extensively in the study – translate into difference?

Although the book does not provide compact answers, it offers an excellent framework for future studies to approach questions of this kind. Specifically, this pertains to its focus on the practical and conceptual challenges faced by government officials who had to be efficient managers of migration flows while also being politically accountable. This was particularly true after the passing of the Aliens Act in 1905, which then prepared the ground for the wholesale registration of 'enemy aliens' in 1914. By then, 'the statistical scrutiny and the official experience of foreignness had developed to the point that aliens were a "known" phenomenon' (p. 184). For historians, all this record-keeping admittedly constitutes a blessing. Prison commissioners, local government boards, health departments, and other state institutions produced an increasing amount of detail about migrants. Many of these records are still underexplored, and McBride's study is a good example of how they can be woven into analyses of British migration histories. If anything, they remind us of the constructed nature of 'alien' categorisation, with concrete impacts on perception and identity. For example, as Lithuanians were registered as 'Russian Poles' before the 1920s, they tended to be associated with the radical social politics present within Russia. As the study moves into the 1920s and 1930s, increased powers of deportation for the state machinery constitute chilling continuities with more recent episodes such as the Windrush deportations. The book is of interest not only to scholars studying Scottish and British immigration history, but also to those studying the relationship between immigrants and the state in a broader sense.

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