

# Golden Door Voices: Towards a Critique of the Ellis Island Oral History Project

*Mario Varricchio, University of Edinburgh*

*This article foregrounds the thematic structure of the Ellis Island Oral History Project narratives and the interview strategy adopted by the fieldworkers by focusing on a sample of interviews with emigrants from Great Britain. The analysis makes it possible to reveal the cultural bias informing the work of the Ellis Island researchers – and therefore the whole collection of Ellis Island oral histories – as revealed by their approach to the interview and relationship with the interviewees. The Ellis Island fieldworkers determine most of the elements constituting the fabric of the informants’ narratives as well as many of the “silences” on significant aspects of the migratory experience which characterize the accounts. Furthermore, they display a largely celebratory attitude based essentially on an uncritical acceptance of the American Dream myth. Therefore, though they represent a valuable source for investigating the history of emigration to the United States in the twentieth century, the Ellis Island oral histories fall short of scholars’ expectations.*

## **I. Immigrant Memories**

The Ellis Island Oral History Project developed by the staff of the Ellis Island Museum in New York City aims at preserving the memories of men and women who landed in America between 1892 and 1954, when Ellis Island was used as an immigrant station.

More than 12 million people were processed in the island’s facilities, most of them from 1892 to 1924, i.e. from when Ellis Island became the headquarters of the federal Immigration and Naturalization Service for the New York area to the year in which a bill severely limiting immigration was approved by the American Congress. The new law used the 1890 Census as the basis to establish immigrant quotas: “[e]ach nation was given a 2 percent quota based on that census. This tended to favor old immigrant nationalities such as the British, Germans, Irish and Swedes, over the new immigration wave of Italians, Jews and eastern Europeans.”<sup>1</sup>

The gradual enforcement of the 1920s restrictionist immigration law and the onset of the Great Depression fundamentally changed the function of the island’s facilities, which now mostly served as a detention and deportation centre for

---

<sup>1</sup> Barry Moreno, “Foreword” to *Ellis Island Interviews: In Their Own Words*, ed. Peter Morton Coan (New York: Facts On File, 1997), xvi.

criminal and illegal aliens. In 1940 Ellis Island became a “federal enemy receiving station, and two years later approximately 1,000 German, Italian and Japanese enemy aliens were held on the island. In 1943 all Immigration and Naturalization Service functions except for detention were moved to the WPA Headquarters building in Manhattan.”<sup>2</sup> In its last years Ellis Island was also used as a sort of laboratory for the cure of physical and psychological disorders and the experimentation of special treatments (such as the shock therapy). Eventually, in November 1954, the place was completely abandoned.<sup>3</sup>

In 1965, President Lyndon Johnson attached Ellis Island to the Statue of Liberty as a national monument and entrusted the National Park Service with the maintenance of the immigration centre. Yet the facilities remained in a state of disrepair until 1986, when the renovation of the Statue called attention to the condition of Ellis Island as well. Four years later, after a successful fundraising campaign and the restoration of the main building, the centre opened to the general public.<sup>4</sup>

Together with the Statue of Liberty, Ellis Island has become a symbol embodying and at the same time reinforcing the public interpretation of the history of emigration to the United States and, more generally, the dominant cultural understanding that American society has of itself. Such interpretation is based on the notion that moving to America “was essentially a strike for personal freedom and the enhancement of individual opportunity [and that] this nation is today what it has always been: a place for hope and opportunity for diverse and less fortunate people throughout the world.”<sup>5</sup> As we shall see below, this is the view that essentially shapes the character of the Ellis Island Oral History Project.

The oral history programme was started in 1973 by National Park Service employee Margo Nash under the aegis of the American Museum of Immigration, the precursor of today’s Ellis Island Museum seated in the base of the Statue of Liberty. Yet most of the interviews have been recorded (in *audio* format) since the

---

<sup>2</sup> Luke Desforges and Maddern Joanne, “Front Doors to Freedom, Portal to Past: History at the Ellis Island Immigration Museum, New York,” *Social & Cultural Geography* 5, 3 (September 2004): 441.

<sup>3</sup> Moreno, “Foreword”, xvi; Coan, *Ellis Island Interviews*, xxvii-xxviii.

<sup>4</sup> Coan, *Ellis Island Interviews*, xxx-xxxii. For a brief summary of the fundraising campaign and Ellis Island restoration process, as well as of the individuals and bodies involved in them see Judith Smith, “Celebrating Immigration History at Ellis Island,” *American Quarterly* 44, 1 (March 1992): 86-88. More generally, on Ellis Island see Barry Moreno, *Encyclopedia of Ellis Island* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> John Bodnar, “Symbols and Servants: Immigrant America and the Limits of Public History,” *The Journal of American History* 73, 1 (June 1986): 137. In particular, it is since the resurgence of enthusiasm for ethnic roots in the 1970s and the publicity following the campaign to renovate the Statue of Liberty and the Ellis Island immigration buildings that Ellis Island has come to be recognized by Americans as an important historical site. Smith, “Celebrating Immigration History at Ellis Island”: 84.

1990s. Actually, in 1990 the Ellis Island Series of the oral history project was launched, as a final attempt to locate the surviving immigrants who went through America's mythical Golden Door and tape their stories.<sup>6</sup> Many of the Ellis Island informants crossed the ocean as children or young adults between the 1900s and the 1920s, and were interviewed in their seventies and eighties.

The Ellis Island collection represents the largest single body of immigrant interviews ever recorded (about 2,000 up to now),<sup>7</sup> yet it has only recently begun to be tapped by scholars. In 1997 Peter Morton Coan assembled a wide selection of excerpts from the immigrants' narratives in his *Ellis Island Interviews: In Their Own Words*, a volume which was meant to call the attention of the academic and general public alike.<sup>8</sup> The latest example of a historical work heavily drawing upon these testimonies is represented by Angela McCarthy's monograph on the Irish and Scottish migration experience in North America and the British Dominions, which discusses some of the main themes covered in the informants' accounts – among them, the emigrants' motivations for leaving their country, the ocean crossing and processing at Ellis Island, the newcomers' preservation of their ethnic identity in America.<sup>9</sup>

This paper focuses on a sample of interviews with men and women who left England, Scotland and Wales at different ages to reach American shores.<sup>10</sup> These emigrants were part of a still large exodus of people moving from Great Britain to the United States in the first three decades of the twentieth century.<sup>11</sup> Though not

---

<sup>6</sup> Most of the EI Series interviews have been, and are still being, conducted by oral historians Janet Levine and Paul E. Sigrist Jr., while other National Park Service personnel are responsible for the interviews done before 1990.

<sup>7</sup> The figure is provided in the Statue of Liberty National Monument and Ellis Island's website: <http://www.nps.gov/archive/stli/serv02.htm#Silent>.

<sup>8</sup> Coan, *Ellis Island Interviews*. The author has changed the names of the informants to respect their privacy and has made a number of other editorial interventions to enhance readability.

<sup>9</sup> Angela McCarthy, *Personal Narratives of Irish and Scottish Migration, 1921-65: "For Spirit and Adventure"* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2007). By the same author see also "Ethnic Networks and Identities Among Inter-war Scottish Migrants in North America", in *A Global Clan. Scottish Migrant Networks and Identities Since the Eighteenth Century*, ed. McCarthy, Angela (London and New York: Tauris Academic Studies, 2006), 203-226. Previously, Marjory Harper had briefly dealt with these interviews, focusing on the emigrants' motives for leaving their country and some of the experiences of Scottish settlers in the United States. Marjory Harper, *Emigration from Scotland between the Wars: Opportunity or Exile?* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 142-46.

<sup>10</sup> The choice of interviews with English, Scottish and Welsh informants ties in closely with my research interests, focused on the history of emigration from Great Britain to the United States in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

<sup>11</sup> In the 1900-1930 period about 800,000 English, 360,000 Scottish and 44,000 Welsh emigrants entered the United States. The beginning of the twentieth century did not constitute a turning point in the movement of British people to America. In fact, until the onset of the Great Depression – which resulted in a virtual halt to transatlantic crossings – the twentieth-century rate of Britons'

strictly representative in statistical terms, the sample reflects the gender, nationality and age ratios of the Ellis Island interviews with British immigrants as a whole. In fact, it consists of a higher proportion of women compared to men and a far larger number of children and adolescents as against adults. With regard to nationality, the sample includes more informants coming from England than from Scotland, while the smallest group of interviewees is the one made up of people who emigrated from Wales.<sup>12</sup>

The central part of this essay highlights the comparative weight and frequency of the subjects discussed in the Ellis Island narratives. Along with the illustration of the interview approach adopted by the fieldworkers, this will enable us to draw some important conclusions on the character and depth of the information garnered through the Ellis Island Oral History Project as well as on the ideological stance informing the work of the Ellis Island historians.

Conclusive proof of the validity of the thesis advanced below could only come from the systematic analysis of most of the corpus of Ellis Island oral histories, which is therefore outside the scope of this essay. However, it is worth emphasizing that the ideological bias of the project is embodied in the structure and content of the rather detailed interview outline utilized by the fieldworkers (see Appendix), and that the researchers follow the outline closely. This will obviously affect the essential form and meaning of the narratives of all informants, irrespective of their nationality.

Compared with the account given by informants of other nationalities the thematic structure of the interviews with British immigrants will probably only differ on a few points. In fact, it is possible to anticipate that topics such as ethnic prejudice will not surface as frequently or be discussed as fully in the interviews with expatriates from Great Britain as in the accounts of people coming, for example, from southern and eastern Europe. This is also the case with the subject

---

emigration to the U.S. was comparable to that of the post-American Civil war age, aside from the 1880s boom decade. The main difference from the previous period is the ratio of Scottish to English emigrants in the 1920s, a decade which saw a marked fall in departures from England as against a dramatic rise in emigration from Scotland. Indeed, for the first time in history, a higher number of people (in absolute terms) moved from Scotland to the United States compared to those who left from England. Rowland Tappan Berthoff, *British Immigrants in Industrial America, 1790-1950* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1968, 1953c), 5.

<sup>12</sup> The list of interviews at the end of the article specifies the nationality and age of the informants. The sample includes 15, 10 and 5 interviews with people from England, Scotland and Wales respectively; the men in the sample are 11, the women 19; the informants under thirteen are 18, while those aged fourteen or older 12. In the entire corpus of interviews with British immigrants – excluding those with people who emigrated after 1945 and a few other accounts which do not fit easily into the corpus, such as those by people with foreign parents who moved at a very young age – the numbers are as follows: 46, 30 and 5 English, Scottish and Welsh emigrants respectively; 32 men and 59 women, 68 emigrants under thirteen and 23 aged fourteen or above (no informant in the entire corpus was thirteen years of age at the time of emigration).

of language, since immigrants from Great Britain spoke with a strange accent but did not need to learn English (apart from the few of them who were born in North Wales and were not bilingual). Finally, it is likely that less space will be devoted to the subject of religion in the accounts of British people, as well as in those of Protestant immigrants in general, due to the similarity between their creed and the predominant denominations in the United States.

## II. Framing Their Tales

The Ellis Island fieldworkers have adopted an interviewing method which stands between the two extremes of the free-flowing dialogue and the “objective” questionnaire, tending decidedly towards the “objective” pole of the continuum. They ask informants a common set of questions in the same order, thus obtaining a corpus of easily comparable narratives.

The interview outline employed in the Ellis Island Series project encompasses the three main phases of the migration experience as they have commonly come to be defined in historical studies – a) the pre-migration phase: life in the country of origin and reasons for departure; b) the move overseas: the voyage and arrival in the land of adoption; c) the post-migration phase: entering and living in the new world – with special emphasis predictably put on the emigrants’ processing at Ellis Island.<sup>13</sup>

Oral accounts are ultimately the result of the interaction between interviewers and interviewees, and therefore the form and substance of the Ellis Island reminiscences have been determined not only by the fieldworkers but also by the informants, and by the relationships which were established between them. This said, it needs to be underlined that the content of oral sources depends largely on the approach of the historian, and that highly structured interviews “may exclude elements whose existence or relevance were previously unknown to

---

<sup>13</sup> More precisely, the interview outline is divided into seven sections: “The start and the old country” and “Coming to America” cover the period before emigration, the decision to leave and the preparation for the trip; “The voyage”, “Statue of Liberty” and “Ellis Island” focus on the move overseas; “Life in America” deals with the emigrants’ experience in the United States; finally, in the “Conclusion” section informants are often invited to assess their decision to migrate or compare the old world with the new. See the question list reproduced at the end of this paper. See also *Ellis Island History Project Interview Questions*, revised by Paul E. Sigrist, Jr., New York: Ellis Island Oral History Office, Ellis Island Museum, 1993. Of course, though the corpus of the Ellis Island narratives taken as a whole shows strong structural and thematic similarities, the interviews’ specific features at times clearly differentiate some of the accounts from the others. Arthur Dickson’s narrative, for example, differs from most testimonies since half of the interview is devoted to the informant’s experience as a coastguard at Ellis Island during World War II. Furthermore, though the average length of the interviews is about 45-50 minutes, there are accounts running for a noticeably longer or shorter time, as is the case with Margaret Kirk’s (1h 22 min.) and Harry Norbury’s (26 min.).

the interviewer and not contemplated in the question schedule. Such interviews tend to confirm the historian's previous frame of reference."<sup>14</sup>

The Ellis Island fieldworkers tolerate a certain flexibility in the succession of the topics within the main sections of the narrative, though a chrono-thematic order tends to be followed in each of them as well. On the contrary, breaches of the time sequence between the main sections are openly discouraged. The interviewers determine most of the elements which constitute the fabric of the informants' narratives and they also prevent them from organizing their plot: in other words, the Ellis Island fieldworkers impose the order of the *fabula* in the accounts being produced, a *fabula* the components of which they have largely chosen.

The informants clearly understand what is expected of them and normally "self-regulate" their accounts. For example, speaking about his mother's apology to an American minister for her husband's lukewarm attitude towards church-going, Allan Gunn breaks off in the middle of a sentence. The anecdote he "chooses" not to tell, triggered by mental association between two events connected to church-going, is the last thing he will say at the end of the interview:

GUNN: "[...] and the minister once told her, 'That's all right, Mrs Gunn. You come often enough for both of you.' So that was quite an experience. But we had, maybe I shouldn't bring it up now, maybe bring it up later, after we arrived here. We had kind of a funny church experience."

SIGRIST: "Well, good. Well, we'll talk about that when we get you to America."

GUNN: "I figured we'll bring that up later."

SIGRIST: "We'll try to do this as chronologically as we can."<sup>15</sup>

However, sometimes informants need to be called to order. This happens to Margaret Kirk twice in a short time. The first invitation to stick to chronology on the part of the interviewer is kind, the second curt:

KIRK: "[...] Oh, I made him wait for years before he married me. No sir. I didn't ..."

SIGRIST: "Before we get to your marriage, let's get you back on the boat, because we haven't gotten you to America yet."<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Alessandro Portelli, "What Makes Oral History Different," in *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning In Oral History* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991), 54.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Allan Gunn, transcript, 7.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Margaret Kirk, transcript, 54.

SIGRIST: “Tell me what you remember about Ellis Island.”

KIRK: “Well, I’m going to tell you the rest of the story, *if you want to hear me*, about what happened to me with my job.”

SIGRIST: “*I want you to tell me about Ellis Island first.*”<sup>17</sup>

A story is told “naturally” when it “shuttles back and forth in time [...] not when it adheres to “objective” chronology but when it departs from it in order to incorporate subjective meaning and judgment.”<sup>18</sup> This may be the reason why, despite the fieldworkers’ strong invitation not to do it, the Ellis Island interviewees detach themselves from the chronological order on several occasions, though the breaches are normally of a minor kind. There are cases of chronological disruption, flash-forwards more often than flashbacks, both within and between the three main sections of the narratives (the pre-migration, emigration and post-migration phases), generally caused by mental association or the moving up of events due to follow soon in the storyline. For instance, when she is asked about her feelings preceding emigration, Mrs. Spinney replies talking about the voyage, sea-sickness, duration of the trip and quarantine on arrival. Only later does she describe the ship’s accommodation and the preparations for departure. Evidently, the unpleasantness of the trip and the uncommon experience of the quarantine left a deeper trace on the informant’s mind and thus come naturally to the fore of her narrative:

SPINNEY: “Yes, I went by myself. My mother and father took me and put me on the ship.”

LEVINE: “And what was that like?”

SPINNEY: “It was, oh, it was, I was excited with all the people on it, you know. But I was a little, I was really scared. But I was seasick for five days. And, uh, a storm come up and smashed the top of the ship in. They had it repaired then, and everybody was running up on deck and screaming. They thought they were going down. And I was so sick that it threw me from the bunk onto the floor, and I just laid there. I didn’t care if I went down with the ship. Then they repaired, they got me up on deck and walked me up and down, and then they, we got into New York, it must have been about, about nine days, we were late getting into New York. When we got in there they quarantined for another week because we had an epidemic on board, and they wouldn’t let me off.”<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 56, emphasis added.

<sup>18</sup> Alessandro Portelli, “*Absalom Absalom!*: Oral History and Literature,” in *The Death of Luigi Trastulli*, 273.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Mrs. Spinney, transcript, 7-8.

Examples of chronological “jumps” from one section of the interview to another are provided by Margaret Kirk’s, Allan Gunn’s, and Agnes Schilling’s testimonies.

Before supplying more details about her trip, Kirk recounts her first day in America, the dinner she had at her hosts’ house and the encounter with her future husband;<sup>20</sup> Allan Gunn, as we have noted above, concludes his interview by narrating the “greenhorn” anecdote he was not allowed to tell at the beginning of the interview, namely the fact that he and his mother had inadvertently entered an all-black church. Agnes Schilling’s account offers the only case in the sample of a disruption of the narrative chronological order involving more than one theme or cluster of themes. The illness of the informant (a condition specified in the notes accompanying the interview) dictates a less rigid application of the interview outline, concerning not so much the kind as the sequence of the questions asked, which in turn results in a looser structure of the narrative. In fact, once the post-migration phase is reached, the interviewer asks the informant to mentally go back to the period she had spent in her native country. This is done in order to fill many “gaps” in the narration (that is, in the interview questionnaire).<sup>21</sup> This disruption of the narrative *fabula*, therefore, is “guided” by the fieldworker, confirming the controlled character of the Ellis Island interviews.

One of the consequences of the rigid application of the interview outline on the part of the Ellis Island fieldworkers is the fact that the accounts do not show significant thematic discrepancies due to gender or nationality.<sup>22</sup> By contrast, some differences can be noticed between the stories told by informants who emigrated as adults or young adults (i.e., when they were fourteen or older) and those narrated by people who left Great Britain as children: this is mainly a consequence of the dissimilar development of the “life history line” of children and adults in relation to the experiences they had in both their native land and country of adoption.

With regard to the general structure of the narratives, there is a significant difference in the space occupied by the various sections of the interview in the accounts given by child and adult emigrants. Actually, the pre-migration phase covers about 36% and 43% of their narratives respectively.<sup>23</sup> Adults have a greater number of subjects to talk about concerning their life in Britain (and, therefore, they deal with some of them in less detail or less frequently). Interviews with adult emigrants also reserve more space for the emigration phase (24% as

---

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Margaret Kirk, transcript, 51-53.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Agnes Schilling, transcript, 10 ff.

<sup>22</sup> It is worth remembering that what we are talking about is not the specific content of the interviewees’ answers, but the thematic structure of the accounts: in other words, it is the *subjects* the informants discuss that are the same, whatever their gender or nationality.

<sup>23</sup> All percentages are calculated from the interviews’ transcripts, based on the number of pages devoted to the various subjects.



against 18%), probably because they have more vivid memories of the trip and arrival at New York. Needless to say, a significantly greater percentage of child emigrant narratives deals with life in America (about 42% as against 29%), since emigrant children remember more about their new life than about their experience in the old country.

In particular, in the section of the interview devoted to the pre-migration phase children speak more frequently and to greater length about grandparents, and supply more information about their school experience and their childhood activities (playtime, for example) than adult emigrants. All of these themes have a comparatively higher importance in the narration of child emigrants not only because they are central to the life of children as such but especially because the pre-migration phase of very young emigrants exhausts itself in childhood experiences. Obviously, mention of the emigration of the interviewees' fathers and of the financial and emotional consequences this had on the life of the family only appears in the accounts of emigrant children, while only adult emigrants discuss work in Great Britain. Also, emigrant children generally remember less about the ocean crossing, some of them virtually nothing. As far as the post-migration phase is concerned, only children talk about school experiences in America, their parents' acculturation and their father's job, whereas the "visit to one's native land" theme is present more often in the accounts of adult emigrants. In fact, people who were very young at the time of emigration crossed the ocean eastward rarely, having little nostalgia to cope with.

All things considered, however, it does not seem to be particularly useful for our purpose to discuss adult and child emigrant narratives separately. The structural similarities between their accounts are much more numerous than the differences, and it will be easy enough to keep the latter in mind when looking at the Figures below, which illustrate the frequency and length of themes in the narratives.

### **III. Frequency and Length of Themes**

One of the first things that strikes attention when examining the Ellis Island oral histories is that they devote more space to the description of the informants' experiences *before* they entered America than to portraying their life in the New World. This is also evident from the difference in the number of questions reserved for the three main phases of emigration in the interview outline. Though there is no direct correlation between the number of questions asked about a given topic and the time informants may spend discussing it, the question list the Ellis Island fieldworkers have decided to use clearly indicates how much weight they intend each of the sections (indeed, each of the topics) to have in the general structure of the interview (see Appendix).

On average, only a little more than a third of the interviews deal with the informants' life after they get through Ellis Island, as against about 60% covering life in their native land and the transatlantic voyage. Apparently, therefore, the fieldworkers were more interested in knowing who the emigrants were, what they did in Great Britain and why they moved, as well as in the passage to the New World and through the Golden Door, than in finding out what became of them in America or how they lived there, albeit not neglecting this side of the emigrants' experience. Though undoubtedly connected to the obvious emphasis the Ellis Island oral historians put on the entry processing phase, this is mainly due to the ideological stance laying behind the production of the narratives, as we shall see in the last section of this essay.

Figures 1-3, one for each section of the narratives, illustrate how often each theme appears in the interview sample and how much space it occupies in the accounts. The themes appearing in less than 20% of the interviews have been left out. The figures also show, under the main headings, the thematic subcomponents: those which appear frequently (50% of the times or more) are in bold type, as distinguished from those which do not appear very often (from 20% to 40% of the times).<sup>24</sup> As far as space is concerned, a two-level subdivision has been adopted, based on the number of pages or lines devoted to each topic in the interview transcripts, which average 35-40 pages in length. The shaded themes occupy at least about one page in the transcripts, though they rarely develop for more than two pages; the subjects which are dealt with in only a few lines have not been shaded.

As can be easily seen, a significant number of topics are just touched upon, more so in the post-migration than in the pre-migration phase, while the migration proper is normally discussed at some length. This is due to the fact that the fieldworkers set themselves the difficult task of covering many subjects in interviews which are not meant to last more than one hour.

The fieldworkers start by defining the communicative context of the interview and providing the informant's essential personal data: the beginning is a brief but highly structured stage of the narratives. The themes which appear most frequently in the pre-migration phase are those dealing with the place where the narrators lived and their immediate family, the affective dimension of the speakers' life and the material circumstances they had to cope with.<sup>25</sup> Less often, the narratives touch upon siblings or extended family members. A few of the themes that appear less frequently are discussed at some length, especially "World War I" and the emigration of the informants' fathers (Figure 1).

---

<sup>24</sup> Of course, the frequency of thematic subcomponents has been calculated in relation to the frequency of the themes under which they are listed.

<sup>25</sup> Needless to say, asking informants to describe their house, and in such detail, is also a way of investigating their economic conditions.

The narration of the emigration phase develops in three distinct stages (Figure 2). The decision to leave, the preparation for the move and the ocean crossing are discussed in all narratives; the experience at Ellis Island is not related 100% of the times because some of the informants were too young at the moment of arrival to remember the processing phase or because, much more rarely, they had travelled second class, and therefore were not taken to the immigrant station. The emigration phase is a highly structured part of the interview, not only in terms of the frequency and fixed sequence of the overarching themes, but also with regard to the number and recurrence of the thematic subcomponents. Informants usually tell about the reasons for emigrating, mention their connections in America, specify what port they left from and what kind of luggage and objects they carried to the United States. With regard to the crossing, the narrators recall the name of the ship and the kind of accommodation they managed to obtain, the duration of the voyage and the food they ate on board; they also often speak about sea-sickness, the way they spent time during the journey and the arrival at New York's harbor; at Ellis Island, it is to the medical examinations, the contact with officials and the final, relieving reunion with their family that they devote more space.

In the post-emigration section of the narratives (Figure 3) a large number of topics are dealt with – ranging from the kind of job informants secured in the USA to the description of their school experiences, from the new family they created in America to homesickness and visits to their native land – but not many have a frequency equal to or higher than 50%. In addition, the number and recurrence of theme subcomponents are lower than in the first two parts of the interview. This is to be ascribed to the comparative brevity of this section and the high number of topics covered in it.

## PRE-MIGRATION PHASE

100%	70%	60%	50%	40%	30%
<b>Start – Presentation</b>  name of interviewer date and place of interview informant's name, nationality and age at the time of emigration year of emigration interest in the informant's story	<b>House</b>  type of house rooms (number and kind) heating system lighting kitchen other rooms in the house furniture and objects layout	<b>Father</b>  name job(s) personality and physical traits time spent/things done with father	<b>Mother</b>  name housework job personality and physical traits	<b>Food/Diet</b>  Sunday/festivities dinners common diet favourite food	<b>Grandparents</b>  job/occupation time spent and things done with them description of their house
<b>Personal data</b>  birthdate birthplace	<b>Childhood</b>  playtime/games chores and other tasks done for the family		<b>Town</b>  general description neighbourhood where informant lived	<b>School</b>  subjects general opinion of it	<b>Father's emigration</b>  job in Great Britain and USA consequences of father's emigration remittances
				<b>Extended family</b>	<b>Job</b>  kind of job
				<b>World War I</b>  family members: drafting and fighting slump and layoffs after war causing emigration scarcity of food/rationing change of jobs	<b>Siblings</b>  name and job
				<b>Religion</b>  denomination family's religiosity	

Figure 1. Pre-migration phase: frequency and length of themes

## EMIGRATION PHASE

<b>Before the journey</b> (100%)	<b>The crossing</b> (100%)	<b>Ellis Island</b> (90%)
reasons for emigrating connections (relatives, friends) in USA packing/things brought to USA port of embarkation goodbyes people emigrating with informant people accompanying informant to port mode of transportation to port information and/or expectations about USA feelings about leaving emigration papers	name of ship accommodations duration of voyage food/dining room sea-sickness people travelling with informant roughness of sea/bad weather entertainment aboard playing on the boat feelings on arrival Statue of Liberty New York cityscape	medical examinations interview with officials reunion with relatives waiting to be processed gathering/lining up in the hall crowd/confusion in the building feelings about Ellis Island clothes worn detention

Figure 2. Emigration phase: frequency and length of themes

## POST-EMIGRATION PHASE

80%	50%	40%	30%	20%
<b>Job</b>  kind of job how informant found it job changes opinion of it hours income time spent doing the same job	<b>School</b>  location foreign accent other immigrant children	<b>Father's job</b>  kind of job income	<b>Trip to final destination</b>  means of transport people waiting at destination	<b>Visit to native land</b>  feelings connected to return
<b>Informant's spouse</b>  circumstances of encounter partner's nationality duration of marriage length of courtship description of partner qualities that attracted informant	<b>Parents' acculturation</b>  how parents felt about USA opinion on the decision to emigrate homesickness	<b>House</b>  location description	<b>Acculturation</b>  how informant felt about USA habits and customs retained from native land opinion of the decision to emigrate	<b>Old age</b>  informant's activities
<b>Residential moves</b>  where why description of new places		<b>New family</b>  number and name of children and grandchildren children's job	<b>Opinion of/comparison between Great Britain and USA</b>	<b>Language</b>  foreign accent
			<b>Great Depression</b>  financial difficulties losing job	<b>Things never done or seen before</b>
<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px; display: inline-block;">First impact</div>				
<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px; display: inline-block;">Spouse's job</div>				

Figure 3. Post-emigration phase: frequency and length of themes

#### IV. A Missed Opportunity

The implicit cultural bias of the Ellis Island Oral History Project is revealed by the thematic structure of the interviews, the subjects discussed in the accounts, the way in which they are treated (especially some of them, as we shall see below), and the interviews' "silences". The term "silences" here refers to the questions researchers do not ask rather than to the topics informants are reluctant to talk about or unconsciously censor. Of course, this reflects the fieldworkers' ideological stance, what they deem worth investigating and what, on the contrary, they consider irrelevant or less important.<sup>26</sup>

As we have already pointed out, the focus of the Ellis Island oral histories is much less life in America than the period preceding emigration, the journey and the passage through the Golden Door. In order to adequately investigate the last stage of the emigration experience (the emigration experience proper, as it were) far longer interviews should have been conducted; possibly, two different recording sessions would have produced an even better result, with the second interview entirely reserved for the description of life in the country of adoption.

Yet the fieldworkers deal with the script of the immigrant story after arrival as if it was already known, and thus not worth repeating. In fact, the Ellis Island Oral History Project parallels the essential spirit and basic aims of the Ellis Island Museum, drawing on the idea of the American society as a successful melting pot as well as on an oversimplified image of the process of nation-building. In this context, the emigrants' story becomes an illuminating, perhaps the ultimate, example of the realization of the American Dream and *E pluribus unum* ideological tenets. At Ellis Island, John Bodnar observes, "complexity is contested [...] by the narrative of nation-building. Thus, the display called "Flag of Immigrant Faces" is seen as a series of individual faces of many ethnic backgrounds when viewed from one angle but looks like the American flag when looked at from another."<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, "even a cursory trip through the site leaves an impression that eventually immigration was only about progress, both economical and political. [...] The possible contradictions of American capitalism are not subjects for review at this cultural place."<sup>28</sup>

What we are saying, it is worth emphasizing, is not that the oral histories lack any evidence of the harsh realities of the emigration experience and the difficulties immigrants had to confront, but that this often needs to be read between the lines and is not meant to be investigated in depth in each interview.

---

<sup>26</sup> On the various kinds of omissions that can be detected in oral histories cf. Naomi Norquay, "Identity and Forgetting," *Oral History Review* 26, 1 (Winter/Spring 1999): 2-3.

<sup>27</sup> John Bodnar, "Remembering the Immigrant Experience in American Culture," *Journal of American Ethnic History*, 15, 1 (Fall 1995), 19.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

Actually, a realistic picture of the immigrants' difficulties in America can only be obtained by piecing together evidence taken from many accounts, and this happens *despite*, rather than because of, the way fieldworkers conduct the interviews and the question list they utilize. Thus, for example, we learn that Thomas Powell's father carried out a low-paid, menial job, that Arthur Dickson's family lived for a while in the New York notorious neighbourhood known as "Hell's Kitchen", and that Archibald Webster's family father was off work half of the time during the Great Depression. We also learn that the economic situation of some British immigrants remained unsatisfactory throughout their lives: Robert Reese, for example, detested his first job in America – he was working as a farmhand – and left it as soon as possible. His next occupation, building truck wheels, was exhausting and earned him a meagre income. Eventually, Reese found a job as a silverware polisher, which he kept for twenty-four years. Yet this must not have paid very well if, as the informant complains, at the end of his service he was only receiving a pension of 70 dollars a month.<sup>29</sup>

The very positive picture of America projected in the interviews can partly be explained by the fact that the informants said what they perceived was "appropriate" in that context, responding to the biased approach of the fieldworkers as well as, more generally, to the public image of Ellis Island – "a repository of patriotic sentiment" Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett pithily defines it – as the gateway to a free and better life for all immigrants, as we have pointed out at the beginning of this essay.<sup>30</sup> In some cases, indeed, the fieldworkers' questions as well as their comments are simply loaded, and thus unsurprisingly elicit answers that confirm the absolute "superiority" of the New World compared to the Old.

It is also likely that many of the informants shared the stance of the fieldworkers, owing to the deeply-rooted belief in the myths of prosperity and opportunity which characterizes American culture. In short, the speakers usually also interpret their life course through the prism of the American Dream, whose core meaning has always been the possibility offered to everybody – through individual effort and spirit of enterprise – of advancing economically and socially, of achieving a high (or in any case *higher*, compared to one's starting point) standard of living.<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> Interview with Thomas Powell, transcript, 8; interview with Arthur Dickson, transcript, 12; interview with Archibald Webster, transcript, 22; interview with Robert Reese, transcript, 34, 46.

<sup>30</sup> Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture. Tourism, Museums, and Heritage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 177.

<sup>31</sup> Cal Jillson discusses the main facets of the American Dream idea from its birth to the present day, defining its essential promise as one by which "those willing to learn, work, save, persevere, and play by the rules would have a better chance to grow and prosper in America than virtually anywhere else on earth." Cal Jillson, *Pursuing the American Dream. Opportunity and Exclusion over Four Centuries* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2004), xi.



The question below clearly illustrates the intrinsic bias of the interview outline. One wonders why the fieldworkers should not also enquire about what the informants *disliked* about America, aiming for a more balanced portrait of the interviewee's experience in the U.S.:

SIGRIST: "What did you like about America the most? What was the most wonderful thing about America, the thing that you liked the absolute most?"<sup>32</sup>

In the same interview the following exchange is also to be found, which is worth quoting at length. The questions asked by the fieldworker, his comments and the opinion expressed by the informant reinforce one another:

SIGRIST: "Well, I have one final question for you. I want to ask you if you think that when you came to America you made the right decision?"

REESE: "I did, I made the right decision."

SIGRIST: "How do you think your life would have been different if you had stayed in Wales?"

REESE: "I'd have been a very poor man. I wouldn't have a job. I'd be on the dole, or whatever they call it. There's a lot of them people that's out of work there now. The slate mines are not working like they used to, you know."

SIGRIST: "That's a hard life."

REESE: "It was a hard life. It was a hard life, yeah."

SIGRIST: "So you, so you're happy you came to America."

REESE: "I'm happy I came over here. It was the best thing I ever done was come over here, yeah."<sup>33</sup>

The fieldworkers' bias may also surface in the questions they do not ask rather than in those that they pose. In fact, the answers informants provide when they are requested to pass a judgement on their country of adoption normally go unchallenged, as if they were self-explanatory. Consider the following examples:

LEVINE: "[...] Okay, so let's start with where you came from."

LIBMAN: "I came from, I was originally born in London but the family moved from London to Liverpool when I was three years of age and then we lived in Liverpool until 1923 and then we came to America. Thank God." (Morris and Janet laugh).

---

<sup>32</sup> Interview with Robert Reese, transcript, 44-45.

<sup>33</sup> Interview with Robert Reese, transcript, 48-49.

LEVINE: “Okay, what is your exact birth date?”<sup>34</sup>

LEVINE: “Is there anything else that you would say about the fact of coming here, having started your life in England and really lived the greatest part of it in this country?”

DICKSON: “Thank God. Thank God!”

LEVINE: “Okay. Well, why don’t we go now to the Coast Guard part of the story.”<sup>35</sup>

The first exchange occurs at the start of the conversation and the fieldworker clearly prefers, so to speak, “to begin with the beginning”, leaving the assessment of the emigration experience to a later stage of the interview. Yet a short digression on the reasons why the informant thanked God for emigrating to America was surely worth making. Here both the rigid application of the interview outline and the ideological bias of the project – of course the informant is grateful he left the Old World for the New, why should he not be? – combine to cut the exchange short and substitute laughing for probing. The second example is taken from the end of the interview, when a general assessment of the emigration experience is usually asked for, as we have seen. Yet, once again, the informant’s enthusiastic exclamation ends the exchange on the topic, as if indeed there was nothing more to say.

The opinions expressed by the interviewees are not challenged even when they clearly appear to be arguable. In the passage below contemporary England is described as a romantically beautiful backward country where people may lack, today just as in the past, even the basic facilities, as opposed to the comforts America offers:

SIGRIST: “Are you glad that your parents opted to come to this country?”

STENZEL: “Yes I am. I am. England is a beautiful, beautiful country. Uh, I love a lot about England when I’ve been there. Um, traditions in England are great, you know. Especially, the Christmas cake at Christmas time, the fruit cake with the hard white icing. I always remembered that. [...] But, um, to want to go back again to live? No. No, like my dad, I think this is my home. But being, being in England and going back again was especially great, I think, and I think you should go back. [...] I think you, you can renew a lot, and it sort of reminds you, I think it reminds you of what you have today. There are so many places in England they don’t even have central heating yet,

---

<sup>34</sup> Interview with Morris Libman, transcript, 1.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with Arthur Dickson, transcript, 17-18.

you know. There's a lot of advances, a lot of things that they're lacking yet."

SIGRIST: "Makes you appreciate what you, what you have."

STENZEL: "It makes you appreciate what you've got."<sup>36</sup>

The Ellis Island historians take for granted that immigrants achieved a satisfactory degree of success and economic improvement, or made good, in America, and that this was something they could not have attained in their native land. They should have been aware that interviewing immigrants at the end of their life is very likely to produce a more favourable picture of the country of adoption than interviewing them, say, in the period immediately following their arrival. Since the final assessment of the informants' economic situation is, inevitably, made from the point of view of the present, in order to avoid utter banality the fieldworkers should at least have tried to investigate the various phases leading to the immigrants' financial stability as well as the human costs paid in the process and the time needed to achieve it. In addition, they should have contextualized historically the immigrants' experience in the USA and the life of those who remained at home by eliciting more in-depth comparative reflections between the old country and the New World. Yet all of this, by putting things in perspective, would have debunked the American Dream myth.

One must not be deceived by the emphasis put in the interviews on the fearful passage through Ellis Island and, in particular, by the fact that informants often provide a grim description of the medical inspection and bureaucratic processing at the immigrant station. The representation of the Ellis Island ordeal is part of the ideologically dominant discourse in the United States; actually, it is (expected to be) portrayed as a veritable rite of passage for newcomers, a challenge they have to meet in order to enter the Promised Land, a price to pay to make their dreams come true.

It may well be that the Ellis Island historians share the widespread notion of the "invisibility" of immigrants from Great Britain,<sup>37</sup> viewing British newcomers

---

<sup>36</sup> Interview with Doreen Stenzel, transcript, 50-51.

<sup>37</sup> In short, Britons are generally thought to have blended into American society rather quickly due to their cultural proximity to American-born citizens, the industrial skills they possessed and their high rate of social mobility (sometimes, it is immigrants from *England* who are deemed to have blended in the most easily). The idea of the "invisibility" of immigrants from Great Britain, with or without qualifications, is also widespread among academics; see Rowland T. Berthoff, *British Immigrants in Industrial America*, 210-11; Charlotte Erickson, *Leaving England. Essays on British Emigration in the Nineteenth Century* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994), 11; William E. Van Vugt, *Britain to America. Mid-Nineteenth-Century Immigrants to the United States* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 2-3, 157; *Ibid.*, *British Buckeyes. The English, Scots, & Welsh in Ohio* (Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 2006), x.

as ideally representing all immigrants' material success and social integration in the United States. However, this would change neither the nature of the question list structuring the narratives nor the fieldworkers' interviewing approach, or their faith in the American Dream for that matter. In other words, it is improbable that the celebratory character of the Ellis Island oral histories is unique to the interviews with British immigrants.

The great majority of the "silences" characterizing the testimonies of British newcomers are also likely to be found in most of the accounts, irrespective of the nationality of the people who were interviewed (silences being, so to speak, the "negative" side of the same celebratory coin). Important topics such as the difficulties emigrants normally encounter once they find themselves in a new country and that accompany them at least in the first period of their new life are not probed. The feeling of homesickness and the attachment to one's ethnic group are given some attention, but the complexity of the individual or family economic arrangements, the harshness of work and living conditions, the possibly strained relations at home and in the workplace are rarely touched upon, or just passed over. For example, regardless of the tradition of struggle British immigrants brought with them from their native country or might have inherited (if they were children at the time of migration), not a few of them were likely to have been involved or at least have witnessed industrial conflict, since many spent their working life in mills, sheds and factories in America.<sup>38</sup> However, there is hardly a trace of strikes or other forms of industrial struggle in the accounts, because no question about this subject is included in the interview guidelines. Indeed, when this issue is discussed at all it is usually the informants that bring it up, as in the case of Archibald Webster, who mentions his father's socialist creed and membership of the Plumbers' union.<sup>39</sup>

Noticeable is also the scarce attention paid in the narratives to the long Depression decade, which had a dramatic impact on American society. Once again, though all of the informants lived through those difficult times, no question about this period is included in the interview outline. Moreover, when the subject

---

<sup>38</sup> British immigrants played a major role in American labour unions, particularly in their formative years, but later on as well. See Berthoff, *British Immigrants in Industrial America*, 88-106; Clifton K. Yearley, *Britons in American Labor: A History of the Influence of the United Kingdom Immigrants on American Labor, 1820-1914* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1957); Steve Babson, *Building the Union: Skilled Workers and Anglo-Gaelic Immigrants in the Rise of the UAW* (New Brunswick, NJ, and London: Rutgers University Press, 1991); John H. M. Laslett, *Colliers Across the Sea: A Comparative Study of Class Formation in Scotland and the American Mid-West, 1830-1924* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000). Finally, it is worth remembering that the *Biographical Dictionary of American Labor* edited by Gary Fink (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1984) lists 56 British prominent trade unionists, a higher number than the Irish, whose weight in U.S. labour organizations is well-known.

<sup>39</sup> Interview with Archibald Webster, transcript, 12, 34-35.

enters the conversation, it is seldom investigated in any depth. Consider the following exchange: the informant states that she does not remember much about the Great Depression because she was very young at the time. Yet she was twelve in 1929, and thus became a young woman in the mid-1930s, when the recession was still biting deeply. It is therefore possible that more numerous and more probing questions would have elicited further information from the speaker. However, the interviewer soon switches to another topic of discussion:

LEVINE: “Oh, uh-hmm. And do you – you came at the very beginning of the Depression.”

MATTHEWS: “Right, right.”

LEVINE: “Did the Depression affect your family much?”

MATTHEWS: “In a sense it did. Like, you know, there wasn’t as much work or laid off for a little while and things like that. Of course I was young. I still had food on the table. I had clothes on my back, you know. So I didn’t really understand it.”

LEVINE: “Uh-huh, I see. So – so you probably saw a lot of changes in Cleveland over the years, too.”<sup>40</sup>

Another significant silence in the interviews – one this time which is likely to differentiate the interviews with British immigrants from those with immigrants who belonged to non-Protestant denominations – is the scant attention given to the religious dimension of the informants’ life in America. The interview outline includes questions about religion in both the sections devoted to life in the country of origin and in America.<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, the fieldworkers normally only investigate this subject as part of the immigrants’ experience *before* departure. A possible explanation is that they assume there was no substantial difference between the informants’ creed and the religious denominations predominant in the United States. Yet some British informants did not profess the Protestant faith – in the interview sample, for instance, Ellen McCann was Catholic and Henry Cohen Jewish – and may have been exposed to religious prejudice in America. In addition, even those who were Protestants might not have been fully familiar with, or may have found it difficult to adjust to, the way their religion was practiced in the new country. Perhaps, apt questions would have produced unexpected findings. In other words, it should be the informants’ *answers* to questions posed about a certain subject that determine its weight in the narration.

In conclusion, it is worth pointing out that, due to the nature of the interview outline and the way in which the interviews were conducted, the narrators who might have ended up by qualifying or even questioning the

---

<sup>40</sup> Interview with Marian Matthews, transcript, 25.

<sup>41</sup> See Appendix.

American Dream were not given a real chance to speak out. Furthermore, it appears to be clear that various key aspects of the emigrants' life in America are overlooked in the accounts, which is difficult to justify in a project purporting to collect the informants' "life histories". Likewise, all the subjects of an interview ought to be adequately explored, and each informant prompted to speak about them in sufficient detail. Actually, "even the most cursory glance at an immigrant community or stream will suggest that not all newcomers behaved in a similar fashion, that varying degrees of commitment to an assortment of cultures and ideologies were evident, and that not everyone faced identical experiences."<sup>42</sup> Thus, it is always worth trying to shed light on individual experiences and compare them with those of other members in the same group.

Such disregard is also at variance with one of the most important tasks oral historians should always set themselves. In fact, while they have the opportunity to highlight common experiences and verify whether individual versions of reality reproduce dominant public narratives, oral historians also have the chance to focus on unofficial and unusual interpretations of historical events and, above all, to tease out from the speakers the unexpected, the "untold".<sup>43</sup> Questioning received assumptions, challenging the dominant discourse, eliciting obscure or unknown aspects of the informants' life should always be a priority for interviewers, particularly when they are enabling the voice of underprivileged people to be heard. In short, oral history is essentially and should continue to be a fundamentally counter-hegemonic practice.<sup>44</sup>

Despite such serious flaws, the Ellis Island narratives constitute a useful source for writing the history of emigration to the United States in the twentieth century and can be fruitfully exploited by researchers, as is the case with the above-mentioned volume by Angela McCarthy. However, the fieldworkers involved in the project could have highlighted a wider variety of shared and individual experiences as well as illuminated obscure corners of the migratory venture, but ended up by standardising accounts, leaving out essential aspects of the immigrants' life and strengthening the oft-told tale of the fulfilment of the American Dream. Indeed, the final impression one is left with is that of a missed opportunity.

---

<sup>42</sup> John Bodnar, *The Transplanted. A History of Immigrants in Urban America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), xvi.

<sup>43</sup> This, of course, can and should be done without pressuring informants in any way.

<sup>44</sup> Mario Varricchio, "Storia orale e storiografia," *Ricerche storiche* 33, 2-3 (maggio-dicembre 2003): 451-477.

## Ellis Island Interviews Sample

The Ellis Island interviews are preserved at the Oral History Office of the Ellis Island Museum in New York City.

- 1) BERLINGHOFF SEFTON MYRTLE, born in England in 1913; interviewed by Janet Levine, December 12, 1993; arrived 1920, aged 7. EI Series 419.
- 2) COHEN HENRY, born in England in 1912; interviewed by Janet Levine, April 8, 1994; arrived 1927, aged 15. EI Series 453.
- 3) COOK WILSON MARGARET, born in Scotland in 1911; interviewed by Janet Levine, February 23, 1994; arrived 1920, aged 9. EI Series 435.
- 4) CROSS HAVENICK ANNE, born in Scotland in 1895; interviewed by Janet Levine, July 25, 1993; arrived 1902, aged 6. EI Series 357.
- 5) DICKSON ARTHUR, born in England in 1921; interviewed by Janet Levine, June 30, 1993; arrived 1925, aged 4. EI Series 341.
- 6) GUNN ALLAN, born in Scotland in 1916; interviewed by Paul E. Sigrist Jr., June 20, 1992; arrived 1925, aged 9. EI Series 179.
- 7) HARLOW EASON KATHLEEN, born in England in 1915; interviewed by Janet Levine, May 18, 1993; arrived 1920, aged 4. EI Series 317.
- 8) JONES GIBBS DOROTHY, born in England in 1906; interviewed by Janet Levine, March 29, 1999; arrived 1908, aged 2. EI Series 1060.
- 9) JONES GRIFFITHS ENID, born in Wales in 1912; interviewed by Janet Levine, April 18, 1993; arrived 1923, aged 10. EI Series 286.
- 10) KENDRICK CUNNINGHAM MARY, born in Scotland in 1918; interviewed by Paul E. Sigrist Jr., July 7, 1994; arrived 1927, aged 7. EI Series 492.
- 11) KIRK SEATON MARGARET, born in Scotland in 1901; interviewed by Paul E. Sigrist Jr., February 25, 1994; arrived 1923, aged 22. EI Series 440.
- 12) LAMBERT GLADYS, born in England in 1899; interviewed by Paul E. Sigrist Jr., May 2, 1995; arrived 1914, aged 14. EI Series 612.
- 13) LIBMAN MORRIS, born in England in 1914; interviewed by Janet Levine, August 25, 1991; arrived 1923, aged 9. EI Series 72.
- 14) MACKLER REBECCA, born in England in 1900; interviewed by Paul E. Sigrist Jr., September 27, 1996; arrived 1915, aged 15. EI Series 810.
- 15) MATTHEWS MARIAN, born in Wales in 1916; interviewed by Janet Levine, March 11, 1999; arrived 1929, aged 12. EI Series 1039.
- 16) MCCANN ELLEN, born in Scotland in 1917; interviewed by Janet Levine, July 18, 2001; arrived 1922, aged 5. EI Series 1210.
- 17) NORBURY HARRY, born in England in 1901; interviewed by Janet Levine, September 6, 1992, arrived 1923, aged 21. EI Series 167.
- 18) PEDERSEN LINDSAY DALY MAISIE (MARY), born Scotland in 1906; interviewed by Paul E. Sigrist Jr., February 26, 1994; arrived 1924, aged 18. EI

Series 442.

- 19) POWELL GLYNNE THOMAS, born in Wales in 1904; interviewed by Paul E. Sigrist Jr., January 30, 1993; arrived 1913, aged 8. EI Series 243.
- 20) REESE JONES ROBERT, born in Wales in 1902; interviewed by Paul E. Sigrist Jr., January 30, 1993; arrived 1920, aged 18. EI Series 242.
- 21) RODWIN MINNIE, born in England in 1907; interviewed by Janet Levine, February 12, 1997; arrived 1910, aged 3. EI Series 845.
- 22) SPINNEY ROGERS PHYLLIS, born in England in 1905; interviewed by Janet Levine, September 17, 1992; arrived 1920, aged 15. EI Series 213.
- 23) SALTMAN DAVID, born in Scotland in 1912; interviewed by Janet Levine, September 26, 1991; arrived 1922, aged 9. EI Series 097.
- 24) SCHILLING DOURISH AGNES, born in Scotland in 1906; interviewed by Janet Levine, June 16, 1992; arrived 1922, aged 15. EI Series 172.
- 25) SONNES HARRY, born in England in 1914; interviewed by Janet Levine, 1998; arrived 1920, aged 6. EI Series 1011.
- 26) SPRATT CHRISTINA, born in Scotland in 1898; interviewed by Janet Levine, March 16, 1999; arrived 1922, aged 23. EI Series 1049.
- 27) STENZEL PAYNE DOREEN, born in England in 1920; interviewed by Paul E. Sigrist Jr., September 21, 1993; arrived 1929, aged 9. EI Series 391.
- 28) TANNER LEWIS VERA ROSE, born in England in 1899; interviewed by Paul E. Sigrist Jr., January 22, 1992; arrived 1920, aged 20. EI Series 120.
- 29) WEBSTER HIGGINS ARCHIBALD, born in England in 1921; interviewed by Janet Levine, January 3, 2005; arrived 1924, aged 3. EI Series 1363.
- 30) WILLIAMS KYFFIN, born in Wales in 1894; interviewed by Paul E. Sigrist Jr., January 30, 1993; arrived 1914, aged 19. EI Series 244.



## Appendix

### ELLIS ISLAND ORAL HISTORY PROJECT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

(Revised by Paul E. Sigrist, Jr., March 1993)

#### THE START AND THE OLD COUNTRY

Good morning/afternoon, this is \_\_\_\_\_ for the National Park Service. Today is \_\_\_\_\_, the \_\_\_\_\_, and I'm in \_\_\_\_\_, at the home of \_\_\_\_\_, who came from \_\_\_\_\_ in \_\_\_\_\_ when he/she was \_\_\_\_\_ years old. Why don't you begin by giving me your full name and date of birth, please.

What is your maiden name? Spell it, please.

Where were you born? Spell it, please.

What size town? Describe what the town looked like? What was the major industry?

Father's name? (spell it if unusual) Occupation? Describe what he looked like.

Describe his personality and temperament. Is there a story about your father that you associate with your childhood?

Mother's name? (spell it if unusual) What was her maiden name? (spell it if unusual) Occupation, if any? Describe what she looked like. Describe her personality and temperament. What were her chores around the house? Is there a story about your mother that you associate with your childhood?

Name all brothers and sisters. (spell if unusual)

Describe your house. What kind of dwelling did you live in? How large? How many rooms? What was it made out of? How was it heated? Was there a garden? What did you grow? What kind of furniture did you have? Was it in or out of town? Did you keep animals? Who else lived in the building?

Who did the cooking in the family? What was your favourite food? Did you help cook? Describe the kitchen. What was meal time like?

Were there other family members nearby, such as grandparents (spell names if unusual). Did you see them often? Were you especially close to someone in your family? Describe where they lived. Please tell any anecdotes about family members.

What was religious life like? What denomination? Was there a nearby house of worship? If so, please describe it. Describe how you practiced your religion in the home. Did you experience any religious persecution or prejudice of any sort? Describe holiday celebrations (food, music, special activities, gifts, religious observations, etc.)?

Describe school life. Did you go to school? Where was the school? Was it crowded? Do you remember specific teachers or playmates? What was your favorite subject? Did you learn English prior to coming to America?

Describe what you did for entertainment. Describe and explain games that you played. Tell favorite childhood stories.

### COMING TO AMERICA

Who decided to come? Did you know someone who was in America already? Was a family member sending money from America? Describe getting ready to go and getting the proper papers. Did you want to come to America? What did you know about America? How did your mother feel? How did your father feel? Did anyone give you a “good-bye” party? How much luggage did you pack? What did you take? What did you leave behind? What kind of luggage did you have? Did you take food? Did you take special belongings? If so, what? Who came to America with you?

### THE VOYAGE

What port did you leave from? How did you get from your home to this port? Describe the journey to the port. Tell any stories about this process. What was the name of the ship? (spell if unusual) Did you have to wait for the ship once you got to the port? If so, where did you stay? With whom? How long? Describe the experience. Did any family members see you off? When did the ship depart? (month and year?) What were the accommodations like on the ship? What class did you travel? Describe your accommodations? Describe the dining room. What was the food like? Were you allowed on deck? Describe what you saw, heard and smelled. Was it rough or smooth? Did you or your travelling companions become ill? Tell any anecdotes about the voyage.

### STATUE OF LIBERTY

Describe seeing land for the first time? Describe seeing the Statue of Liberty for the first time? Did you know what it was? Describe other people’s reaction to this experience. What were your first impressions of seeing New York City from the boat?

### ELLIS ISLAND

How did you get from the ship to Ellis Island? Describe your impressions of seeing the Ellis Island building for the first time? Describe your impressions of the inside of the building. Were you frightened? Were you excited? Do you remember what you and your travelling companions were wearing when

you arrived at Ellis Island?

How did your travelling companions feel about being at Ellis Island?

Was Ellis Island crowded? Was it clean? How were you treated by the staff?

Describe the medical examinations? Where did they do it? How did they do it?

Did everyone have the same examination?

Describe some of the people or things you saw at Ellis Island.

Were you detained at Ellis Island? If so, why? How long? Where did you eat?

Describe the experience. Where did you sleep? With whom? Describe the accommodations. Any stories you associate with staying at Ellis Island?

How were you entertained while you stayed at Ellis Island?

Who came to meet you? When? How did you leave Ellis Island?

## LIFE IN AMERICA

What were your expectations of America?

Where did you go after you left Ellis Island? What address? What city? How did you get there? Who met you once you got there? Describe the trip to your destination (i.e. train trip, subway ride, taxi, boat, etc.)? Did you see anything you had never seen before?

Describe the apartment or house? How many rooms? How many people lived there? How was it furnished? How was it lit? How was it heated? Was there indoor plumbing? Describe the neighborhood? Who lived there? Did other family members live near by? Did you get along well with your neighbors?

What jobs in America did family members get? Who supported the family? Did you work when you first got here? Did anyone not work? Describe the various jobs?

Did you go to school? Describe the building and class. How did you feel about going to school? Were you treated well by your fellow students? Do you remember any of the teachers? If so, why do you remember him/her? Any stories or anecdotes?

How did you learn English? Describe how you learned English. How difficult was the process? How did your family members learn English? Any stories associated with learning English?

Did you experience bigotry or persecution in America? Any stories or anecdotes. What was religious life like in America? Did you live near a house of worship? If so, name it and describe it. Who was more religious, your mother or your father? Why?

When did you move from this address? Where did you move to? For how long?

Describe what you did for entertainment.

Describe how your family members (i.e. mother, father, grandparents, etc.) adjusted to life in America? Did anyone return to live in their country of origin? If so, why? Was your family satisfied or dissatisfied with life in America? Describe

the individual adjustments of your father and your mother.

Did any family tragedy occur during the years following your coming to America? If so, what? Describe the experience.

Briefly describe the course of your life (i.e. marriage, children, occupation, anecdotes about meeting your spouse, etc.).

#### CONCLUSION

Are you happy you came to America? Were your parents (or other pertinent family members) happy they chose to come to America?

(graciously) Well, that's a good place to end this interview. I want to thank you very much for taking the time for us to come out and speak with you about your immigration experience (or some such gracious wrap-up statement, allow them to respond if they choose to).

This is \_\_\_\_\_ signing off with \_\_\_\_\_ on \_\_\_\_\_ the \_\_\_\_\_, for the Ellis Island Oral History Project.