“From Fjord to Prairie”: Early Twentieth-Century Accounts of Migration and Mental Illness

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Abstract

1925 marked the hundredth anniversary of Norwegian migration to the United States, and by 1930 some 800,000 Norwegians had left their homeland and settled largely in the American Midwest. The effects of this translocation provoked considerable discussion and debate in the early twentieth century. Commentators on both sides of the Atlantic examined its impacts on American society, as well as the individual migrant, and directed particular attention to the mental status of the Norse newcomers. Of the many works published at the time, this paper examines three: “The Tragedy of the Immigrant”, Giants in the Earth, and Emigration and Insanity. “Tragedy” is a magazine article written in Norwegian by Kristian Prestgard, editor of an Iowan newspaper. It was published in English in 1924 and purported to offer “a few plain, home-made thoughts” on the immigrant experience. Giants is a historical novel by Ole Rølvaag, a Minnesotan professor, that told a story of pioneer immigrants in the 1870s. Rølvaag first wrote and published the book in Norwegian in 1924 and 1925, then translated and published it in English in 1927. He was particularly interested in the psychology of the early settlers. Emigration is a medical report. It was written in English by Òrnulf Òdegaard, a psychiatrist in Oslo, and published in Copenhagen in 1932. Òdegaard viewed European migration to America as a social “experiment” and believed that its study could benefit both “objective science” and immigration practice. My paper considers how each of these seemingly disparate works depicted immigrant mental illness and used the construct of illness to assess the costs and benefits of migration from the old world to the new.