Land of Their Choice: The Immigrants Write Home. Edited by Theodore C. Blegen. (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1955, pp. xix, 463. Index. $5.75.)

This remarkable book presents a first-hand account of a neglected phase of American history. It is a collection of letters which Norwegian immigrants wrote to relatives and friends at home about the land of their choice. All the letters selected were written originally in Norwegian during the period from the 1820's to the 1870's. While they represent a geographic spread from coast to coast, most of them were written from Pennsylvania, the Middle West, Texas, and California. In the Scandinavian countries such letters were called “America letters” and the impulse they generated among others to emigrate was diagnosed as “America fever.” These letters form a diary on a grand scale and are significant for the image of America that they transmitted to the people of Norway. They are important, too, for their revelation of immigrants as human beings with names, personalities, and all the attributes of men and women living their lives amid change and struggle. These Norwegian “America letters” will remind historians of the existence of similar source material in other European countries, the study of which may well provide a fresh approach to our history. To illustrate—Professor Blegen states that, as not one of the California letters translated from early Norwegian newspapers has so much as been cited in any general work on the forty-niners, the story of the gold rush has not yet been fully told.

The editor, dean of the Graduate School of the University of Minnesota, travelled to Norway, where he collected the letters from Norwegian families and newspapers which frequently published “America letters.” He made typewritten and photostatic copies, which were ultimately deposited in their complete form either in the archives of the Norwegian-American Historical Association at Northfield, Minnesota, or in the Minnesota Historical Society in St. Paul. Arrangements were made to have the originals preserved in Norwegian collections. Professor Blegen did more than edit this work. His chapter, “The Immigrant Image of America,” and his introductions to the various other chapters interpret and supplement the stories told by the immigrants in a manner that will be welcomed by those concerned with this phase of history.
The "America letters" were not confined to the rank and file of the immigrants. Ole Munch Raeder, a distinguished jurist, visited the United States in the 1840's to study the American jury system. His letters took the form of a searching commentary on American life. Frithjof Meidell lived in Springfield, Illinois, in the 1850's and saw the comic aspects of the American West in an amusing manner. Cleng Peerson, the "Daniel Boone" of the Norwegian migration, scouted the West for suitable places for his countrymen to settle and later blazed their trail to Illinois, Iowa, and even to Texas. No single early letter writer, the editor reports, had more influence than Gjert G. Hovland, whose hundreds of letters were published in Norway's newspapers. Hovland's bright picture of America was essentially the one accepted by thousands who sought ships to carry them to the New World. The immigrant letters also tell the story of Oleana, which Ole Bull, the colorful Norwegian violinist, sought to establish in Pennsylvania in 1852.

For the most part the immigrants were people of little education, and land, work, and hardships bulk large in their reports. While most of them were content in their new home, they soon discovered that in America the hedges did not "consist of sides of bacon and tobacco" nor was it a land filled with "little roasted piggies" that politely asked one to have some ham. Many did not survive the ordeal of the Atlantic crossing of from six to fourteen weeks. Others who travelled westward on the Erie Canal complained that they were crowded in the boats like pigs and in general were treated like swine. They suffered from disease and from hard work done at a pace to which they were unaccustomed. Those ignorant of the English language were frequently cheated by unscrupulous "Yankees" and in some instances by their own countrymen. Land was often more expensive and less fertile than they had been led to believe. On the other hand, reverses did not destroy the immigrant's faith in the freedom of the new land. A Chicago group reported to the people back home that "here it is not asked, what or who was your father, but the question is, what are you? . . . Freedom . . . seems as essential to every citizen of the United States as the air he breathes" (p. 203).

The letters are filled with advice and warnings of pitfalls to be avoided by those contemplating migration to the
New World. The old, the well-to-do, and those with large families were advised to stay at home. America was a place for the young, particularly young farmers. The emigrants were warned that American and English shipowners overcrowded their boats and in general served poor food and an inadequate supply of water to their passengers. Norwegian boats were better but even these should be carefully inspected before departure to make certain that the owners were prepared to comply with the terms of the contract. Everywhere there was emphasis on work and those reluctant to engage in hard manual labor were advised to remain behind. The discovery of gold in California fired the imaginations of Norwegians and was in part responsible for the increase of emigration from 1,400 in 1848 to 4,000 in 1849. Ships were chartered by groups of gold-seekers. Only a few who ultimately reached the promised land met with any success in the gold fields. Some found employment at good wages as carpenters, mechanics, and as common laborers. Others moved on to better opportunities in Washington and Oregon.

This work is a fine example of scholarly editing and historical interpretation. The footnotes are where they should be, at the bottom of the pages, and there is an adequate index.

Indiana University

Powell Moore


It is a curious fact that no serious, full-length biography has ever been written of James A. Bayard, an American statesman deserving of such attention not only for his own accomplishments but also because he was the progenitor of a succession of Bayards prominent in national politics. The subject has been literally crying for attention since 1913 when Bayard's papers were published in the annual report of the American Historical Association, but Borden's book is the first one to face the challenge.

This worthy addition to the Columbia Studies in the Social Sciences does not pretend to be much more than an in-