# MARCUS LEE HANSEN[1]

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The field of immigration historiography is necessarily a young one, and the lack of generalists inevitably focusses attention on the few who have attempted to deal with the immigration story as a whole. No one has yet succeeded in this, but the proliferation of monographic studies, both in the United States and Europe, not to speak of elsewhere, is bringing the field toward the point where a general study of convincing quality might be produced. Such was not the situation when Hansen, Stephenson and even Wittke produced their general studies. The most recent attempt, that by Maldwyn A. Jones, is more a useful synthesis than a new approach. That by Oscar Handlin is of course not a synthesis but an imaginative and impressionistic evocation of the experience of certain of the immigrants and does not qualify as a general history. We therefore still have no adequate general history of American immigration. Interest in Marcus Lee Hansen has been primarily because he was among the first to attempt a general interpretation. That his attempt was inadequate is in large part a natural result of the weakness of the field in his time, although he did not make full use of what has been done even in his own time. There is a natural tendency to inflate the significance of "firsts," and there is evidence that this has been true of the promoters of Hansen's work. It is perhaps time to try to see him in perspective.

Any appraisal of the work of Marcus Lee Hansen must begin with a clear and firm understanding of the fact that the bulk of his contributions were published after his death. They were therefore published without benefit of the revisions he unquestionably planned. I recall distinctly a conversation with him at the American Historical Association meeting in 1937, a few months before he died. In reply to my inquiry about the state of his general history of immigration he stated firmly that the manuscript was "on the shelf indefinitely for complete rewriting." There are indications in his papers that Hansen was trying to rethink the whole enterprise. He cannot be taken to task too strongly for viewpoints and approaches which might have been changed radically in a revised version. There is furthermore evidence that his work on the general history was spasmodic, that he turned aside to other projects such as the analysis of the census of 1790, the linguistic survey of New England, and most of all the study of Canadian-

American population movements, and that he did not keep up with the monographic work in the general field, or at least did not give indication of having digested it. The fact is that, at the time of his premature death, his manuscripts on a general history of immigration were in an incomplete and tentative stage.

It is not a criticism of Arthur Meier Schlesinger to say that The Atlantic Migration, 1607-1860 and the small volume of essays entitled The Immigrant in American History benefited in a major way from the editorial process, by what Oscar Handlin in his introduction to the paperback edition of The Atlantic Migration called "imaginative editing." The same is even more true of the superb work of the late John Bartlett Brebner on The Mingling of the Canadian and American Peoples. Brebner's work was so extensive that there was clear justification for placing his name along with Hansen's on the title page. Whether or not there was equal justification for placing Schlesinger's name on the title page of at least The Atlantic Migration only Schlesinger could have told. It is, of course, commonplace that good editors can make good books out of even the most unlikely manuscripts. With Schlesinger it was undoubtedly a labor of love, and, having made it his project he became, characteristically, also its strong promoter, with the Pulitzer Prize the ultimate accolade. Marcus Hansen was well served by his friends and colleagues.

In this necessarily brief appraisal of the contributions of Marcus Lee Hansen I propose to focus largely upon The Atlantic Migration and a little on The Immigrant in American History, but only incidentally on the Canadian-American volume. I propose to examine Hansen's use of sources, then to describe and criticize his hypotheses, and finally to try to estimate Hansen's continuing usefulness.

One turns first to Hansen's notes and manuscripts for guidance as to his methods and views, but the general impression is disappointing. This is partly because Hansen's handwriting is very difficult to read and is at times undecipherable. A checking of his papers with the documentation in The Atlantic Migration reveals reasonable accuracy, although Mack Walker states in his recent Germany and the Emigration, 1816-1885 (p. 265) that he has found errors. The notes show a rather narrow range of materials, partly the consequence of the primitive stage of techniques in those days for assembling materials. He appears to have paged through quite a number of newspapers, some pamphlet collections, some public documentary materials and some of the emigrant guidebooks. There is very limited use of the invaluable "America letters." There is virtually no evidence in the papers of notes on monographic material, and none at all for anything published after 1930 even in The Atlantic Migration. There is little evidence that Hansen made use, in his surviving writings, of monographic material available to him at the time he wrote up his researches, probably in the 1920's.

There is little evidence that he made use of, although he must have known about, the work of Stephenson, Blegen, Wittke, Foerster, Thomas and Znaniecki and others, all of whom were making important contributions both as to information and methodology at the same time that Hansen was at work on the general history. His cavalier treatment of Blegen's Norwegian Migration to America, in the American Historical Review for April, 1932, and his failure to utilize Blegen's important contribution has troubled some of us ever since.

It would have been impossible for Hansen to have covered all areas and sources in his research, and so there are inevitable limitations here as well. One finds in his notes use of newspapers of parts of Ireland and England; parts of Germany, especially the southwest; and Denmark. On this side of the Atlantic, he used Niles Weekly Register, but few other American papers. There is some use of consular reports in printed form, but he did not use the manuscript reports as far as I know. The notes and the documentation in The Atlantic Migration indicate very limited use of European economic history. He seems to have tried to secure a spot-check of certain regions of emigration, and to try to derive generalizations from such area investigations. As he must have realized at the time, such an approach is at best limited in usefulness. It was perhaps the best he could do in the time he had for his research.

The primary focus of his research, chronologically, was on the period from 1815 to 1860. The early portion of The Atlantic Migration was obviously included with the commendable purpose of showing the continuity of the migration process from the beginning of colonization in North America. However, the material for the periods before 1815 was clearly inadequate and the treatment is the weakest part of the volume. His editor doubtless included this early material to try to give a broader perspective to the immigration story, but one wonders if even this was wise. Hansen's contributions were chiefly on the period after 1815, and chiefly in terms of selective research in limited areas of Europe.

In remarks made on papers concerning Sources of Culture in the Middle West, p. 108, edited by Dixon Ryan Fox and published in 1934, Marcus Hansen briefly stated his general approach to the study of emigration.

> And some will now ask the question, "What is this Neo-Turnerism that you were talking about?" Briefly, it is propounded by those who believe that the West was not merely the frontier of the American population, but of the European population as well.

As a product of Turner's seminar at Harvard, Hansen might be expected to project into his studies of emigration the principal hypothesis propounded by Turner. By doing so, however, Hansen shackled immigration history for a generation with a limited and a not particularly useful approach.

According to this neo-Turnerian interpretation, emigration from Europe was primarily destined for America and especially the United States. Hansen never quite makes up his mind as to the relative effects of the "push" and "pull" factors, but deals chiefly with the former. Although attention is paid to the short-lived Russian "frontier" of emigration from the upper Rhine area, the frontier Hansen has in mind is mostly that in the United States. In this simplistic view, one looks for causes, finds the ports to which the emigrants journeyed, discovers that the port cities found emigration good business, finds that trans-Atlantic traffic is stimulated, brings the emigrants across with due attention to hardships and lands them in America with the implied assumption that they then went west, along with the native-Americans who were moving westward. In essence this is what Hansen did, except that he did not trace them inland after their arrival in America. He makes some interpretive remarks in his essays concerning the role of the immigrant on the frontier, but Hansen did not venture into the field of acculturation to any extent. With reference to Europe, however, he imposes this hypothesis of the expansion of European peoples as a movement to a frontier.

Hansen's interpretation is subject to a number of criticisms. One is that while a large proportion of European emigrants did come for a time or permanently to the United States, a very sizable number did not remain in the United States and an even larger number did not go to the United States at all. To treat European emigration as a one-way westward movement is simply inaccurate. Another objection is that Hansen ignored the intricate and long-standing patterns of migration within Europe which gradually accelerated as the nineteenth century progressed and industrialism intensified. The primary factor in population movement, apart from population increase, was the rise of new labor markets as the great industrial complexes came into existence. It is by now clear that as many or more people joined the urban drift as emigrated. There would appear to be greater justification for speaking of the movement of people from rural to urban labor markets and from rural village economies to large scale American or other farming opportunities than to speak of migration to a "frontier" anywhere. The movement was from limited opportunity to greater opportunity. In the early nineteenth century these opportunities were for Germans and Scandinavians on the farming lands of the American West and in Brazil and Argentina. For the later emigrants the opportunities were in the industrial areas of Europe and America. To deal with the Irish exodus as only to the United States is to ignore the very large seasonal and permanent emigration to England and the British possessions. The Turner hypothesis is simply a confusing nuisance in dealing with the migration of peoples.

Although a good deal of work had been done even in Hansen's time in demographic research, far more has come out since his time. The work of

Simon Kuznets, Brinley Thomas and numbers of others has demonstrated conclusively the close relationship of capital migration, business cycles and human migration. Equally involved are the statistics of population increase, involving all the statistics of births, deaths, disease, age distribution, sex disparities, fertility rates, etc. When these multiple demographic considerations are studied and even the most tentative conclusions are drawn, it becomes increasingly apparent that the so-called Atlantic migration is a part, albeit a large one, but only a part of the larger story of the movement of peoples. The American frontier in the sense of the Turnerian free lands becomes a phase and a sector of the larger story.

Another favored feature of the neo-Turnerian interpretation of migration is that of a movement from limited freedom to a true freedom in the American democratic society. In his recently published book, Germany and the Emigration, 1816-1885, Mack Walker seems to present convincing evidence to alter this stereotyped conception. At least as far as the Germans of the same period dealt with by Hansen are concerned, here is Walker's conclusion:

> The Auswanderer went to America less to build something new than to regain and conserve something old, which they remembered or thought they did: to till new fields and find new customers, true enough, but ultimately to keep the ways of life they were used to, which the new Europe seemed determined to destroy. In the hearts of the Auswanderer of those years, theirs were not so much acts of radical affirmation as acts of conservative rejection. They wanted to escape rootlessness (or mobility, if you prefer); or rather, they felt their roots being torn up, and sought a place to sink them again, for they could not contemplate living in another way. They were not characterized by "the willingness to break with old traditions . . . to gamble the peace of their families and the security of their heirs on an uncertain future," to quote a typical description. Something like that may have happened to many of them in America, but few intended it when they left. They were rather, I think, people who traveled thousands of grim miles in order to keep their roots, their habits, their united families and the kind of future they wanted for their families. They did not wait passively for their roots to be broken, to be sure; yet they were conservatives, who acted radically in order to preserve, and who journeyed to another world to keep their homes. (p. 69)

In other words, and one could document Walker's conclusion from the experience of the Scandinavian groups and virtually all groups, the emigrating

families and individuals sought to realize overseas the pattern of life denied to them at home. It is, of course, this same transplantation of societies that is the main theme of Thomas and Znaniecki and their now classic sociological study, The Polish Peasant in Europe and America (1918). A similar approach is in Theodore C. Blegen's study of societies in transit, the transition of Norwegian social units from Norway to the United States. Both of these studies were available to Hansen. Instead of a deterministic movement westward to new frontiers in the United States, a more realistic approach seems clearly to be a study of migration of societies, involving study of economic and cultural dislocation, previous attempts at migration and final movement by reason of financial or other factors to a new location somewhere, perhaps within Europe, perhaps overseas. That the general direction of large numbers of European emigrants happened to be westward bears little relationship to the Turnerian frontier hypothesis. The land and labor markets were for a time partly in that direction. That is all.

One of the seemingly original theses set forth by Hansen was that of the immigrant in America as a "filler-in" on the frontier. It was his contention that emigrants found the raw edge of the frontier too difficult to master and that they tended to buy in at a later stage of the Turnerian frontier. After the native-American frontiersman, possessed of the necessary techniques, had opened up a frontier, the emigrant would acquire land behind the cutting edge. The emigrant, in other words, was cautious and unadventurous. I must draw upon my own studies in dealing with this generalization. It has been my observation that there are so many exceptions to this "fillers-in" hypothesis that the interpretation becomes virtually worthless. I have found countless examples of emigrant settlements out on the raw frontier with no evidence of any "fillers-in" stage. This is true of Swedes and Norwegians and Danes and German-Russians and Bohemians and on and on. Germans were Hansen's prime exhibit in this "fillers-in" role, but there are innumerable exceptions. It has been my conclusion that the hypothesis is not a useful one.

Hansen's generation was very much preoccupied with "contributions" by emigrants to American life. In his essay on "Immigration as a Field for Historical Research," Hansen asks: "This mingling of social systems raises the natural question: what has immigration as a whole, or any national stock, contributed to American culture?" He goes on to call for studies of the contributions by individuals and emigrant societies in communities across the United States. The approach assumed an American culture and a multiplicity of alien cultures somehow making contributions. This approach is today clearly naive and unwarranted, but it persists in the filio-pietistic writings of the emigrant-American historical and fraternal societies. What actually went on was neither the American versus alien culture pattern nor the unfortunately proposed and named "melting pot," but rather a slow amalgamation, slight in the early generations, delayed longest

in certain highly self-conscious groups, completed most quickly in certain English-speaking groups, but continuing at various speeds and in various degrees. The core of the whole process was the identification of the immigrant with the American constitutional system, with its ease of access to citizenship, its protection of the rights of property and its guarantees of civil liberties. The American population has been cosmopolitan from the beginning, and its so-called American culture has been a function of the multiplicity of culture strains. To speak of an "American culture" to which immigrants made contributions, and to ask historians to find these contributions, is manifestly a rather absurd approach. However, there are those even today who want immigration history written in this way, so Hansen cannot be criticized too much perhaps. He should have known better.

To turn from these generally negative criticisms of Hansen to a few kind words, so to speak, it should be pointed out that Hansen, along with Stephenson and Wittke, thought of European emigration in terms larger than national groups. They were pioneers in attempting to weave the story of European emigration into general European and American history. They recognized the epic quality of the movement of so many thousands of emigrants -- ultimately millions of them. They realized that this was a neglected field and they sought valiantly to correct the lack of emphasis. In terms of the limited materials at their disposal, they brought order out of a chaotic and controversial field. They trained students who would do monographic work leading to an ultimately satisfactory synthesis. It is no reflection on these students and followers of the first generation of immigration historians that the production of monographic studies has been slow in coming and that the day of synthesis has been delayed. It is furthermore no service to these early generalists to perpetuate hypotheses set forth by them in terms of the rather primitive stage of research in which they operated. I am certain that they would be among the first to accept corrections of their views made necessary by the contributions of allied disciplines and by the host of new monographic studies, especially those on the Scandinavian countries, on England and Ireland, on Germany, on Italy, on Greece and certain other areas.

How useful is Hansen's work today? Having learned my methodology from non-Hansen sources, I escaped much of the negative qualities of Hansen's approach. When I was asked to do an appraisal of Hansen, I agreed with some hesitation but felt duty-bound to try to see if I had somehow missed something. A re-reading of Hansen has clearly deepened my impressions of him. Only in the case of the volume co-authored by John Bartlett Brebner on Canadian-American population movements did I feel that there was legitimate definitiveness of treatment. Had he lived, it is quite possible that the book would not have been as good. In any case, it does seem a pity that we will never know what ultimate synthesis Hansen

might have produced had he been permitted to live out his life. We are all the poorer for that loss.

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Footnotes:

This paper was read at a session of the Organization of American Historians, April 22, 1965, in Kansas City.

[1] The materials used in the preparation of this paper, in addition to my own rather extensive sources for a general history of European migration to America since 1815, consisted primarily in the following: the works of Marcus Lee Hansen, many of which are mentioned in the text; certain interpretative articles, notably Frank Thistlethwaite, "Migrations from Europe Overseas in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries," in Rapports, V, Histoire Contemporaine, XIe Congres International des Sciences Historique (Stockholm, 1960), 32-60; Edwin Mims, Jr., American History and Immigration (Bronxville, N. Y., 1950); Allan H. Spear, "Marcus Lee Hansen and the Historiography of Immigration," in Wisconsin Magazine of History (Summer, 1961); Dixon Ryan Fox, ed., Sources of Culture in the Middle West (New York, 1934); Mack Walker, Germany and the Emigration, 1816-1885 (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1964); and the papers of Marcus Lee Hansen, Houghton Library, Harvard University.