

The Book Corner

The immigrants: what it was like

By ALLAN GOULD
For nearly 35 years, Barry Broadfoot has been known as this country's greatest oral historian. His is an honorable and respected field - the personal stories of apparently insignificant people are often far more insightful and more moving than the diaries and records of generals, politicians and dictators. We may, for example, learn a lot more about the Second World War, and human nature, from a soldier's letters home than from a brass hat's battle plans.

That is why one turns with legitimate anticipation to Broadfoot's latest work, *The Immigrant Years: From Europe to Canada 1945-1967* (Douglas and McIntyre; 255 pages; \$22.95).

And although this reader did not find it as satisfying as such previous volumes of Broadfoot's as *Ten Lost Years*, it is still an important document.

DRAWBRIDGE UP
As the author notes, Canadians were "smug and affluent" after the Second World War, with 61 per cent not wanting even the British to come here.

It is as if we fought that war to make the world safe for democracy, but not necessarily to let any part of that world on to our particular shores.

The titles of Broadfoot's chapters tell what one can expect here: *Freedom and a New Life*, *We Were War Brides* (46,000 British women came over after the war), *Nobody Told Us What It Would Be Like*, *Another Land*, *Another*

Language, *Got to Get a Job*, *Exploitation and Discrimination*, *We Never Had It So Good*, and *Becoming Canadians*.

PUTTING IT BEHIND
Some chapters are far more affecting than others. It is important to read such statements as that by the Dutchman who mocks the cliché that many came to Canada "because it was the Land of Promise."

No, he says, "we came to Canada to forget what we had done to each other in the war... Everyone else in the country, the city, the village was their enemy, because they were all fighting to get one thing, food. First, food, any food, food you wouldn't feed your worst dog today, food no government would allow to be sold or even fed to the poor."

Statements like that help explain the earlier cry from a Czechoslovakian who weeps, "Canada, all you people in it, excuse my bad English, but my wife and babies and me, we thank you. We thank you so much."

LONELY DAYS
Not that it was all thanks, of course. "The worst thing in the first days was the loneliness,"

recalls one immigrant. "You had nobody to talk to... I'd sit on this little bed and listen to the radio I had, and when a song reminded me of some other time, I would cry. I cried a lot."

If it was often a living hell to come to Canada from England - already fluent in at least one of this country's languages - then how much more agonizing, for those from Eastern and Central Europe. "I used the (Eaton) catalogue as a textbook," says one immigrant. "There were pictures and the descriptions... this is a sweater. This is a frying pan. This is a bed. And so on. You see how easy it was."

But often even the brightest immigrant could not get around our grotesque rules for immigrants. As one government official remembers, "these were men who had been doctors, lawyers, accountants, engineers, men of quality any country would have been happy to have. Men who had a purpose in life, a sense of achievement, a large measure of pride and would

have contributed a great deal to Canada, but they were being shut out."

DOWN-GRADING
He goes on to describe how these talented immigrants had been told overseas that they were to "downgrade their education, their skills, their accomplishments, in order to fit into certain slots the Canadian government had set up. I mean laborers. That really was what it was all about."

There is some ugliness in the book as well, and it doesn't come from the immigrants, either, who numbered nearly three million, in the first two decades after the war: Slurs of "Bohunk"; jealousy from native-born Canadians; fear of the stranger.

As the author puts it, "new-comers thought that Canadians did not work hard enough... They did not think that Canadians loved their country enough, either, and said they loved it more."

UNIQUE LOVE
And they probably do love this country more, in the way that immigrants who have gone through war, famine and heartbreak must surely do.

I would have liked more information on the people interviewed by Broadfoot - their ages, countries of origin, how well they did here, what their children do. But the handful of wonderful photos of immigrants almost makes up for it.

The Immigrant Years is an important record, and one from which native-born Canadians could learn a lot.

The new-comers interviewed in the book? They know it all, only too well, and often from very bitter experience.

Allan Gould's latest books are *Letters I've Been Meaning to Write*, and *The New Entrepreneurs: 80 Canadian Success Stories*.

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