



PROJECT MUSE®

Welsh Americans: A History of Assimilation in the Coalfields
(review)

Irwin M. Marcus

Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies, Volume 77,
Number 1, Winter 2010, pp. 99-100 (Review)

Published by Penn State University Press
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/pnh.0.0008>



➔ For additional information about this article
<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/369616>

Ronald L. Lewis. *Welsh Americans: A History of Assimilation in the Coalfields*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008. Pp. 408, maps, bibliography, index. Cloth, \$49.95.)

This book should become the standard work on the Welsh experience in the United States. It combines clarity of presentation with a narrative and analysis grounded in thorough research and a variety of sources. The author's accomplishment is more impressive because of the absence of a body of scholarship comparable to those of the larger immigration streams. Using the history of life and labor in the Welsh coalfields of the early nineteenth century as a backdrop, Lewis discusses and analyzes the causes, character, and consequences of Welsh assimilation while eschewing the crafting of a precise definition of the term and avoiding involvement in the melting pot and cultural pluralism issue.

The anthracite region, which attracted the largest cluster of Welsh immigrants, is the book's geographical focus, although other coal regions receive attention, especially Eastern Ohio, where the Welsh worked in iron and tin plate mills and coal mines. Wilkes-Barre and Scranton served as the main cultural hub and hosted numerous churches, voluntary associations and community events. Adjacent coal mines offered employment and many immigrants displayed civic interest. The arrival of the Welsh immigrants coincided with a burst of economic activity highlighted by industrialism. However, continued economic development depended upon the presence of the larger cohort of skilled labor. The Welsh brought experience as coal miners and industrial workers, which contributed to national economic growth and gave them the opportunity to begin their work experience at a higher rung of the job ladder than most immigrants. By the end of the century, the Welsh had moved into supervisory positions, became state mine inspectors and labor leaders, and achieved economic success in other realms.

This comparatively rapid and easy assimilation was the result of a variety of factors. The Welsh value system dovetailed closely with that of mainstream America, as both emphasized hard work, initiative, and accomplishment. Their Protestantism placed them in a favorable position, especially when the flood of Catholic immigrants aroused fears among Protestants. High levels of naturalization, civic engagement, and Republican Party support enhanced their prospects for assimilation.

Lewis focuses on the Welsh experience and their assimilation and seldom deviates from that course, except for a brief exploration of the stormy

relationship between the Welsh and the Irish in the anthracite fields of the 1870s. This example highlights the different experiences of two ethnic groups, but Lewis provides no examples of an immigrant group with a number of characteristics similar to the Welsh, such as German Jewish immigrants. German Jews, although they needed to overcome linguistic and religious barriers to acceptance by American public opinion and public officials, commanded a formidable arsenal comparable to the Welsh. Many of them, as Reform Jews, belonged to a faith which prided itself on its adaptability and willingness to fit into the parameters of their host societies. Although they operated in very different vocational niches than the Welsh, they also achieved success as merchants, manufacturers, and bankers. Their value system conformed to mainstream America as it emphasized hard work, education, and upward vocational mobility. Another asset was their patriotism, reflected in the celebration of national holidays, their veneration of national heroes, and a strong attachment to the American Revolution.

An understanding of the Welsh assimilation experience is enhanced by an awareness of the similarities and differences with other immigrant groups. Although the Welsh had an easier and faster assimilation process, even they did not obtain immediate and unconditional acceptance. Other immigrant groups of the era, such as the Chinese, Irish, and Mexicans, faced a much longer and difficult path to assimilation.

IRWIN M. MARCUS

Indiana University of Pennsylvania

Davitt McAteer. *Monongah: The Tragic Story of the 1907 Monongah Mine Disaster*. (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2007. Pp. xi, 221, notes, bibliography, appendixes, index. Cloth, \$30.00.)

McAteer's work is undeniably significant and his extensive research is evident. He presents a chronological history of Monongah, West Virginia and its development; from a briar town to its role in the country's largest coal producing company. Having been founded on incestuous agreements, consolidations and on exploitative economic principles, its explosion, and the fallout landed on the backs of its laboring families, according to McAteer, may have been imminent.