

Literacy and the immigration of “undesirables,” 1903

Introduction

During the Progressive era, tens of millions of immigrants came to the United States from Europe to fulfill their American dream. During this period most came from southern and eastern Europe, particularly from Italy, Russia, and the Slavic countries. Many of the “new” immigrants came from poor regions and often had little formal education; literacy, therefore, became a benchmark for their acceptability as Americans.

The Immigration Restriction League (IRL), founded by Harvard graduates and led by Prescott F. Hall, lobbied for stricter rules on immigration. In 1903, the IRL drew up a report to argue its case and identify those immigrants it deemed “undesirable,” as opposed to those “whose character and standards fit them to become citizens”:

[W]hile there has been some increase in the immigration from Northern and Western Europe, the great proportion of immigration has come as usual from the less desirable races of Southern and Eastern Europe, and there has been a considerable influx of illiterate Japanese.

William Williams, Commissioner at New York, is quoted as declaring that, as a result of this demographic shift,

at least 200,000 (and probably more) aliens came here who, although they may be able to earn a living, yet are not wanted, will be of no benefit to the country, and will, on the contrary, be a detriment, because their presence will tend to lower our standards.

In 1917, this influential lobbying group, with the help of powerful political allies, got Congress to pass a literacy test as part of the 1917 Immigration Act. The IRL essentially determined which ethnic groups had the “character and standards” worthy of acceptance in America.

Questions for Discussion

Read the introduction and study the complete pamphlet. Then apply your knowledge of American history to answer the following questions:

1. Imagine that you could interview Prescott F. Hall of the Immigration Restriction League. How would he explain the reason for the establishment of the Immigration Restriction League and its objectives, and how would you respond?
2. By nationality, which potential immigrants would have been included among the Immigration Restriction League’s “less desirable races”?
3. According to the Immigration Restriction League, what would have been the effect on the United States of the continued admission of “undesirables”?
4. Who did William Williams, Commissioner at New York, hold responsible for encouraging immigration at the turn of the century?

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PUBLICATIONS OF THE IMMIGRATION RESTRICTION LEAGUE No. 38.

Immigration Figures for 1903.

(From data furnished by the Commissioner-General of Immigration.)

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A Comparison of the Fiscal Years ending June 30, 1902 and 1903.

	1902.	1903.
Total immigration	648,743	857,046
Percentage of increase over 1902		32
Percentage of increase over 1901	33	76
Percentage of increase over 1899	108	175
Percentage of increase over 1898	183	274
Number debarred from entrance and returned within one year after landing	5,429	9,316
Per cent. debarred and returned	0.8	1.1
Number of illiterates over 14 years of age. [See Note 1.]	165,105	189,008
Per cent. of illiterate in total immigration over 14 years of age	28.7	25.0
Immigration from countries of Northern and Western Europe. [See Note 2.]	138,700	203,689
Per cent. of total immigration	21.4	23.8
Immigration from countries of Southern and Eastern Europe. [See Note 2.]	480,331	610,813
Per cent. of total immigration	74.0	71.3
Immigration from Asia	22,271	29,966
Per cent. of total immigration	3.4	3.5
Average money brought, in dollars	16	19
Per cent. of immigrants who have been in the United States before	9.5	8.9
Per cent. of total immigration having no occupation, including women and children	23.6	23.3
Per cent. of total immigration who were farm-laborers, laborers, or servants	60.6	57.3
Per cent. of total immigration destined for the four States of Ill., Mass., N.Y., and Pa.	67.8	65.4

NOTE 1.— Although the percentage of illiteracy shows an improvement this year over last, it should be remembered that these figures are based upon the manifests, which in turn are made up from the statements of the immigrants. One test recently made at New York showed that 175

Immigration Figures for 1903, Immigration Restriction League, Publication No. 38, Boston, 1903, page 1.
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immigrants listed as able to read and write were, in fact, illiterate. The recent agitation for an educational test for immigrants has undoubtedly made the latter more disposed to assert their ability to read and write.

NOTE 2. — "Northern and Western Europe" includes the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Scandinavia, Belgium, Netherlands, and Switzerland.

"Southern and Eastern Europe" includes Austria-Hungary, Italy, Poland, Russia, Spain, Portugal, Greece, Turkey, and the Balkan States.

GENERAL REMARKS. — Immigration has reached the high-water mark during the past year, exceeding that of the largest previous year (1882) by nearly 70,000. It is gratifying to note an increase of over one-third in the proportion of those debarred and returned, and to testify to the great improvement in the efficiency of the service since the present Commissioner-General took office. Attempts are also being made to secure an adequate inspection on the frontiers of Canada and Mexico, and steps are being now taken to ascertain definitely the aliens in our penal and charitable institutions.

On the other hand, while there has been some increase in the immigration from Northern and Western Europe, the great proportion of immigration has come as usual from the less desirable races of Southern and Eastern Europe, and there has been a considerable influx of illiterate Japanese.

Hon. William Williams, Commissioner at New York, says in his report: "Without the proper execution of [the present laws] it is safe to say that thousands of additional aliens would have come here last year. But these laws do not reach a large body of immigrants who, while not of this class, are yet generally undesirable, because unintelligent, of low vitality, of poor physique, able to perform only the cheapest kind of manual labor, desirous of locating almost exclusively in the cities, by their competition tending to reduce the standard of living of the American wageworker, and unfitted mentally or morally for good citizenship. It would be quite impossible to accurately state what proportion of last year's immigration should be classed as 'undesirable.' I believe that at least 200,000 (and probably more) aliens came here who, although they may be able to earn a living, yet are not wanted, will be of no benefit to the country, and will, on the contrary, be a detriment, because their presence will tend to lower our standards; and if these 200,000 persons could have been induced to stay at home, nobody, not even those clamoring for more labor, would have missed them. Their coming has been of benefit chiefly, if not only, to the transportation companies which brought them here."

The largest elements in recent immigration were:

	1899.	1900.	1901.	1902.	1903.
Southern Italian	65,639	84,346	115,704	152,915	196,117
Polish	28,466	46,938	43,617	69,620	82,343
Scandinavian	23,249	32,952	40,277	55,780	79,347
Hebrew	37,415	60,764	58,098	57,688	76,203
German	26,632	29,682	34,742	51,686	71,782
Irish	32,345	35,607	30,404	29,001	35,366
Slovak	15,838	29,243	29,343	36,934	34,427
Croatian and Slovenian	8,632	17,184	17,928	30,233	32,907

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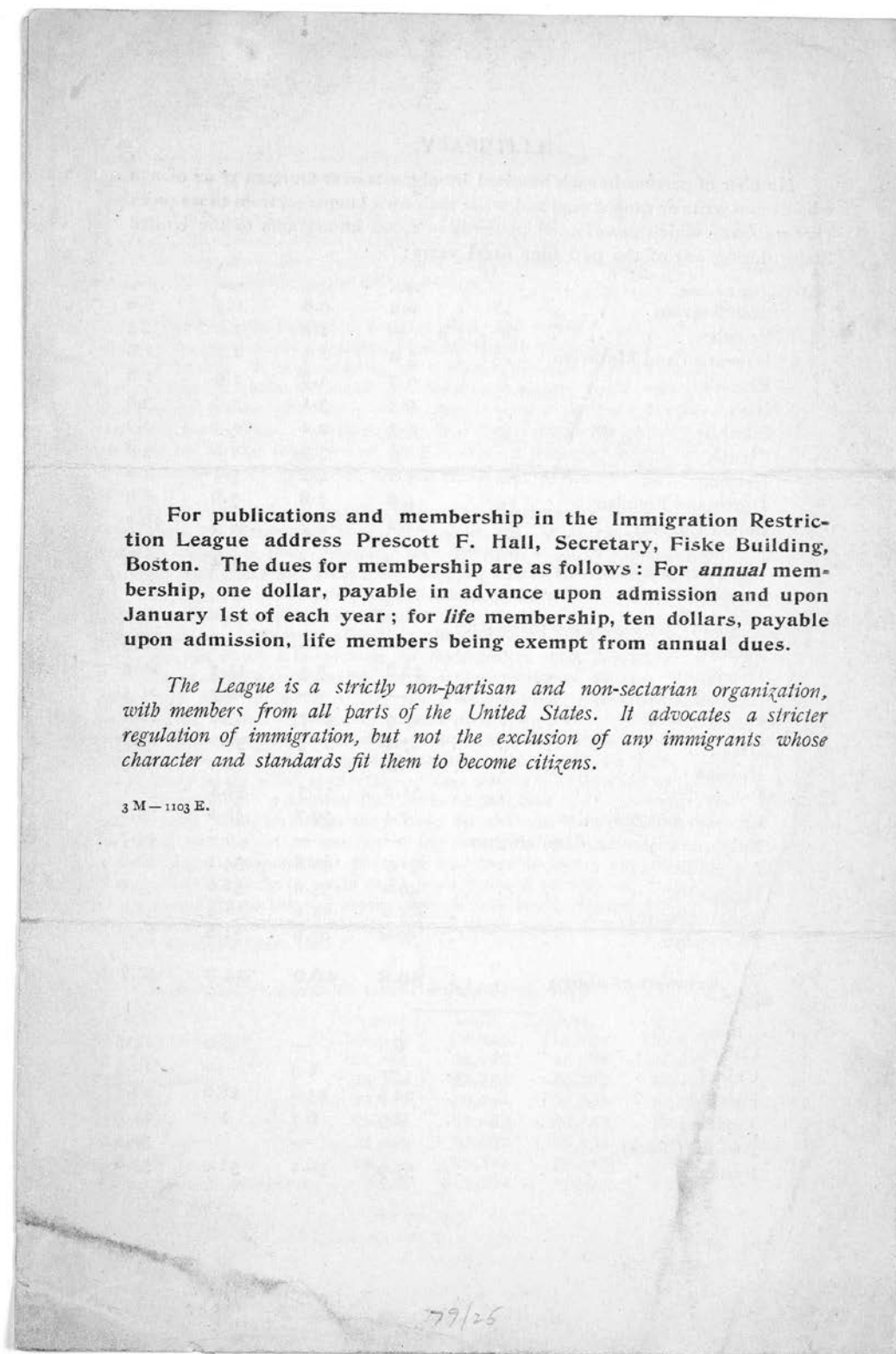
ILLITERACY.

Number of persons in each hundred immigrants over fourteen years of age who cannot write or cannot read and write their own language, from those races (*not nations*) which contributed upwards of 2,000 immigrants to the United States during any of the past four fiscal years:

	1900.	1901.	1902.	1903.
WESTERN EUROPE.				
Scandinavian	0.9	0.8	0.5	0.6
Scotch	—	1.2	1.2	1.2
Bohemian and Moravian	3.0	1.5	1.6	1.6
English	0.2	1.8	1.9	1.6
Irish	3.3	3.2	3.9	3.8
Finnish	2.7	2.2	1.4	2.2
French	3.9	3.9	4.8	3.8
German	5.8	4.1	5.4	4.6
Dutch and Flemish	9.6	7.8	7.6	6.9
Italian (North)	11.2	15.7	14.4	12.7
Average of above	4.2	5.6	4.4	3.9
EASTERN EUROPE (WITH SPAIN AND PORTUGAL).				
Spanish	—	—	—	8.9
Magyar	16.8	7.5	13.3	10.5
Roumanian	—	—	28.3	21.5
Slovak	27.9	30.7	25.9	21.6
Greek	17.1	25.9	30.0	27.7
Russian	—	—	—	31.9
Polish	31.2	37.5	38.4	32.1
Croatian and Slovenian	37.4	39.7	42.2	35.2
Bulgarian, Servian, Montenegrin	—	—	—	44.7
Lithuanian	31.7	49.8	54.1	46.6
Ruthenian	49.0	53.2	50.0	49.4
Italian (South)	54.6	59.1	56.4	51.4
Portuguese	59.9	63.8	71.6	73.2
Average of above	39.8	46.0	44.3	39.7
OTHER RACES.				
Cuban	6.8	—	8.0	4.2
Chinese	—	6.9	—	12.9
Hebrew	22.9	23.6	28.6	26.5
Japanese	8.9	6.7	1.2	27.0
African (black)	—	—	—	32.5
Syrian	55.9	56.1	51.0	53.8

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For publications and membership in the Immigration Restriction League address Prescott F. Hall, Secretary, Fiske Building, Boston. The dues for membership are as follows: For *annual* membership, one dollar, payable in advance upon admission and upon January 1st of each year; for *life* membership, ten dollars, payable upon admission, life members being exempt from annual dues.

The League is a strictly non-partisan and non-sectarian organization, with members from all parts of the United States. It advocates a stricter regulation of immigration, but not the exclusion of any immigrants whose character and standards fit them to become citizens.

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Immigration Figures for 1903, page 4. (Library of Congress, Rare Book and Special Collections Division)