
EMIE Bulletin

Ethnic and Multicultural Information Exchange Round Table

Vol. XXI No. 2 Winter 2003

ISSN 0737-9021

American Library Association

Leaders in Library Work with Immigrants: John Foster Carr (1869-1939), Propagandist for Americanization

by

Plummer Alston Jones, Jr.
East Carolina University

During the half century between the American Civil War and World War I, New York grew from approximately 1,500,000 inhabitants in 1870 to 5,000,000 in 1915. New York reigned supreme as the major port of entry for immigrants to the United States as well as the terminus for the routing of immigrants westward across the three thousand miles of the American continent.

Although many immigrants, particularly those interested in agricultural pursuits, stopped in New York only long enough to get directions to the nearest plot of fertile land, many were attracted by the allure of the city. Urban immigrants, many of whom were unaccustomed to the rural lifestyle, weighed heavily the advantages of access to cultural, religious, and educational institutions and the opportunity to ply here in America the skills learned and crafts mastered in Europe. For urban immigrants, New York was the destination of choice, for it was there that they hoped to join and renew ties with relatives, friends, and acquaintances from their homelands who had settled and established roots earlier.¹

For the sake of convenience, public library branches were established in the midst of the teeming immigrant neighborhoods, often located in lower Manhattan not far from disembarkation centers at Castle Garden and, later, Ellis Island. As upwardly mobile immigrants left the congested tenements of Manhattan, branches were erected in more affluent neighborhoods in the boroughs of Brooklyn, the Bronx, Queens, and Richmond.² Librarians of these branch libraries sought books, pamphlets, and magazines in foreign languages as well as simple

English to give immigrant readers a better understanding of the history, government, literature, and customs of their adopted country and biographies of America's heroes and heroines. Although librarians were eager to provide Americanization materials in foreign languages, they could not always locate publishers and dealers in the United States.

One of the few publishers was John Foster Carr. A native New Yorker, educated at Yale University and Oxford University. Carr's worldview was shaped by his travels in Italy.³

On his return to New York, Carr, a man of independent means, launched his career as a journalist and special correspondent in 1903. He wrote numerous feature articles for the widely read and respected periodicals *World's Work*, *Outlook*, and *Suburban Life*, all published in New York.⁴

Carr's articles dealing with immigration and the immigrant experience revealed his perspective regarding American immigrants gained from firsthand observations in the immigrant colonies in

In this issue...

QBPL Spanish language website.....	3
Adult Services.....	4
Children's Book Reviews.....	12
Job Opening.....	13

(Continued from page 1)

New York and conversations with immigrants themselves. Carr noted in his writings that American immigrants were not a single, united mass of humanity, and could not be discussed as a block.

He observed also that the majority of first-generation immigrants in New York tended to live in almost totally self-contained and self-sufficient neighborhoods located near their places of employment. From the immigrant's perspective, this housing and occupational pattern allowed them not only to maintain Old World customs but also to achieve a group consensus regarding accommodation to New World realities. From Carr's perspective, this pattern hindered their Americanization.⁵

Although Carr never wavered in his conviction that immigrants desired to be Americanized, was the archetypal Anglo-conformist. Although he often referred to the "melting pot" assimilation theory, Carr wanted the melting pot to instill American traits while obliterating or melting away foreign traits.⁶

Carr and the Connecticut Daughters of the American Revolution

As early as 1908, Carr had identified immigrant education as the key to hastening the Americanization process. He wrote Clara Lee Bowman, a member of the Bristol chapter of the Connecticut Daughters of the American Revolution, and shared with her his mission to educate the immigrant. His intent was not to preach American ideals to the immigrant, but to impress upon him the fact that if he became an American citizen, he could make, in turn, a significant contribution to the betterment of the nation. "He should learn of the advantages of citizenship and the steps to take in order that he may become a citizen. Some such information could with great advantage be conveyed to him in an attractive pamphlet, illustrated, a small and practical guide to the new life among us."

Carr realized that to fulfill his mission, he needed the full cooperation of individuals and organizations that shared the Americanization of the immigrant as a common goal. He would need the support of the public schools, public libraries, and, case in point, patriotic institutions like the

Daughters of the American Revolution.⁷ Carr left New York and his responsibilities as a journalist to accept a temporary position as head-master of the Interlaken School, a private boys' school in LaPorte, Indiana, where he served a brief tenure between 1909 and 1911. Concurrently he maintained his contacts with the officers of the various Connecticut chapters of the DAR. They recognized in Carr's idea of a guidebook for newly arrived immigrants a vehicle for the furtherance of their own organization's goal of patriotic education.⁸

With the financial backing of the Connecticut DAR chapters assured, Carr proceeded to solicit educators and reform-minded individuals for their suggestions as to the content of the proposed guidebook for immigrants. He began to contact potential publishers for suggestions regarding the layout of the information and design of the guidebook. In response to his queries, Carr received helpful suggestions and enthusiastic support from Jane Elizabeth Robbins, executive secretary of the Public Education Association in New York, who served with Carr on the managing board of the Italian-American Civic League. He also received help and advice from Jane Maud Campbell, then librarian of the Passaic Public Library. Campbell had formerly helped to produce an English-Italian primer for immigrants during her tenure with the 1906 New Jersey Immigration Commission.⁹

Immigrant Guide

After negotiations first with Putnam and then with Doubleday, Page and Company, Carr chose the latter as the publisher of the guidebook. During the summer of 1910, Doubleday, Page and Company published Carr's *Guida degli Stati Uniti per l'Immigrante Italiano*, under the auspices of the Connecticut DAR. Carr immediately organized a lecture tour to promote the *Guida*, the convenient appellation used by Carr and DAR members in their correspondence and speaking engagements. The lectures in the main were presented to Connecticut chapters of the DAR in cities where Italian immigrant colonies flourished, notably Hartford, New London, New Haven, Danbury, Torrington, Meriden, New Britain, Bridgeport, Bristol, and Norwalk.¹⁰

(Continued on page 8)

Taking into account Carr's affinity for the Italians and his concern regarding their initial lack of commitment to remaining in America, it was consistent with his educational mission that his guidebook would be in the Italian language. The *Guida* was conceived by Carr as a handy compendium of information to answer the questions of the adult Italian immigrant.

Each section of the *Guida* was prepared to fulfill a particular informational need as determined by Carr in personal interviews with Italian immigrants. Each section was later read to groups of immigrants for their candid comments on the appropriateness of the information presented, and their suggestions for its improvement were solicited. To ensure the relevancy and accuracy of the text, Carr presented drafts of pertinent sections of the *Guida* to experts in the fields of law, naturalization, housing, and health for them to augment and revise.

The *Guida*, designed to be portable and durable, was bound in green paper covers and measured approximately seven by five inches. The meagerly illustrated text was arranged in twenty-six topical sections, from "Societies Helpful to the New Arrival" to "How to Become a Citizen of the United States." The subliminal message that ran through each section was that the good American speaks English, makes education a priority, becomes a citizen, and votes. With regard to education specifically, Carr gave enthusiastic endorsement of educational services offered at no charge to the immigrant, including public schools, evening schools, and free lectures. He urged immigrants to take advantage of the resources for learning English and preparing for citizenship available in the many branches of the New York Public Library, where materials were available in Italian and other foreign languages.

Carr devoted a considerable amount of text in the *Guida* to promote his vision for the distribution of immigrants throughout the nation rather than their concentration in a few congested urban centers. He urged Italian immigrants to leave the congestion of the cities and return to the soil. In addition to his lectures as secretary of the National Liberal Immigration League of New York, Carr made special trips to encourage communities sponsoring immigrant farming enterprises in

locations as diverse as *Wilmington*, North Carolina, and Binghamton, New York. The *Guida* concluded with Carr's "Special Advice to the Immigrant." Italian immigrants were warned not to speak loudly, not to gesticulate, and not to resort to violence. They were urged to dress well, eat better, and pay careful attention to their personal hygiene.¹¹ In comparison to nativist propaganda of the period, Carr's Anglo-conformist propaganda was condescending, but not cruel. Nevertheless, the subliminal message underlying the *Guida* was that immigrants must conform to American ways.

Despite its overtly patronizing language, the *Guida* was well received. From California to Massachusetts, Carr received congratulatory greetings on The Little Green Book, a popular appellation applied to the *Guida* by educators, lawyers, and businessmen. Libraries in cities with large immigrant populations, including the New York Public Library, purchased multiple copies of the *Guida*. The Massachusetts Free Public Library Commission endorsed it and recommended its purchase to immigrants and Americans alike. Andrea Sbarboro, founder of the Italian-Swiss Agricultural Colony in Asti, California, and officials of the Royal Italian Emigration Commission, praised Carr and his associates in the Connecticut chapters of the DAR for their efforts on behalf of Italian immigrants.

Carr received not only suggestions for the improvement of subsequent editions of the *Guida* but also numerous requests for different versions of the *Guida* to be published in other immigrant languages as well as in English. In 1911, an English version was issued, according to Carr, "with the double purpose of letting those of our friends, who do not read Italian, know what we are really trying to do, as well as to satisfy a growing demand for the book for teaching foreigners English, as it has been found that it serves this purpose very admirably."¹⁴ Again, the response was positive. The evening schools of Providence, Rhode Island, approved both the Italian and English versions of the *Guida* for use as textbooks in classes with Italian immigrants and the evening schools of Boston and New York were also interested.

Issued later, the Polish and Yiddish versions also were received enthusiastically, the latter receiving singular praise from the leaders of the

American Jewish community. Mary Antin, the noted Russian Jewish immigrant author, wrote that "the book anticipates every question the bewildered immigrant is sure to ask and calls his attention to a multitude of facts that are of the first importance to him at the beginning of his career in a new country. It will prevent millions of blunders, hundreds of failures and tragedies." In a similar vein, Rabbi Henry Pereira Mendes, then President of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of the United States and Canada, remarked that "the publication of a fifteen-cent book has done more to solve the question [of] how to Americanize the immigrant than one hundred societies."¹²

Senator William P. Dillingham praised the *Guida*, proclaiming that "its distribution is a service of the highest importance, having in it the promise of untold good to all prospective citizens and to society."¹³ The chilling irony of Dillingham's comment was that the commission bearing his name, also known as the 1907 Federal Immigration Commission, was responsible for gaining the Congressional and public support that would lead to the nation's first major legislation to place restrictions and tighter controls on immigration to the United States.

Carr also maintained a good working relationship with Terrence V. Powderly, who headed the Division of Information of the Bureau of Immigration and Naturalization, then under the auspices of the U.S. Department of Commerce and Labor. Powderly helped with the writing and editing of the section of the *Guida* on naturalization laws and procedures, and at Carr's urging, he agreed to speak at the Annual State Congress of the Connecticut DAR in 1911.¹⁴ Although requests were received for versions in twenty-four different languages, only versions in Italian, English, Yiddish, and Polish appeared, due solely to a lack of adequate financial backing.

The *Guida*, in all of its versions, filled a definite need that few publishers, including the federal government, had addressed effectively. The information was accurate and up-to-date, and its moderate price of fifteen cents rendered it affordable to even the poorest immigrant. Within three years of the appearance of the *Guida*, 22,000 copies were sold or otherwise distributed throughout the country.

The *Guida* firmly established Carr's reputation as an advocate for free im-migration. He was frequently called upon as representative of either the National Liberal Immigration League or the Italian-American Civic League to lecture and debate in favor of immigration-related issues at public forums.¹⁵

Dante Alighieri Society

Carr worked in cooperation with the Connecticut DAR chapters in the second phase of their patriotic education endeavors. As a member and representative of the Societa Nazionale Dante Alighieri, an Italian cultural society promoting the welfare and education of Italian immigrants in the United States, Carr served as a liaison between these two dissimilar organizations that, for the moment, shared a common goal.

The Dante Alighieri Society would provide, free of charge, standard libraries of fifty Italian books to American public libraries and DAR reading rooms in communities with Italian immigrant populations. The strategy was simple: to lure the Italians into libraries using the bait of books in their native tongue. Carr believed that once immigrants were exposed to the friendly atmosphere of the library and the help of sympathetic librarians, they would be introduced to materials to hasten their Americanization.

Carr, who was well-read and conversant in Italian literature, helped to select the books to be included in the Dante Alighieri Society libraries. He also coordinated the effort to gather the requests from DAR chapter regents as well as mayors and librarians in the major cities of Connecticut. Carr received requests for Dante Alighieri libraries from interested parties in Hartford, New Haven, New London, Stamford, Meriden, Danbury, Derby, and Ansonia. These he forwarded, along with his own personal justifications, to the Dante Alighieri Society headquarters in Rome.²¹

The Dante Alighieri Society graciously granted the collections of fifty Italian books, and a year later, in 1912, awarded Carr a diploma in appreciation of his educational work with Italian immigrants in the United States. That same year the King of Italy bestowed upon Carr the Cross of Chevalier of the Order of the Crown.¹⁶



Carr was convinced that the public library was the most appropriate and practical agency for the promulgation of his propaganda for immigrant education. Carr joined the American Library Association. Addressing the annual meeting of the Massachusetts Library Club at Williamstown, Massachusetts, in 1913, Carr welcomed the challenge of immigration and urged librarians to assume positions of advocacy for immigrants. The same message came forth at the Washington (DC) conference of the ALA in 1914, with emphasis on the primacy of the public library as a driving force in immigrant education.¹⁷

Immigrant Publication Society

Although not a librarian himself, Carr envisioned his role in immigrant education as that of the publisher and supplier of the materials needed to assist librarians in their work with immigrant clientele. In 1914, he founded a nonprofit organization whose purposes were the education of immigrants and their distribution throughout the United States.

The Immigrant Publication Society, sometimes referred to during its early years as the Immigration Education Society, was conceived as a membership organization "open to all who are interested in promoting the welfare of the immigrant and through his education, the welfare of the Country." The expenses of the society were paid out of the income derived from the dues of approximately 165 members and the sale of publications to individuals and institutions, primarily libraries, that purchased the society's publications in bulk.

An executive board, or "council of direction," was appointed by Carr to oversee the operations of the society. The council included librarians Edwin H. Anderson of the New York Public Library, Charles F. D. Belden of the Boston Public Library, and Frances E. Earhart of the Duluth (MN) Public Library. Educators on the council were Stephen Pierce Duggan of the Institute of International Education, Richard Gottheil of Columbia University and the Educational Alliance of New York, and Mary Alice Willcox, professor emerita of Wellesley College. Social worker Kate Holladay Claghorn, New York School of Social Work, served alongside religious leaders Rabbi Henry Cohen of Galveston,

Texas; Ralph E. Diffendorfer of the Interchurch World Movement; and the Right Reverend Peter J. Muldoon of the National Catholic Welfare Council. Rounding out the council's membership were the Honorable Irving Lehman, justice of the United States Supreme Court, and immigrant leaders and community activists Andrea Sbarboro of the Italian-Swiss Agricultural Colony in Asti (CA), Thomas Siemiradzki of the Polish National Alliance in Cleveland, and Antonio Stella of the Society of Italian Immigrants in New York.

Although the collective credentials of the executive board members were impressive, the support of the council of direction was at best moral and nominal. The Immigrant Publication Society remained essentially a one-man operation. Carr corresponded extensively with members of the council of direction and valued their suggestions.

Carr's Immigrant Publication Society sought to publish works that would enable librarians and social workers to adopt "a sympathetic approach" to library work with immigrants. Membership in the society included the opportunity to write Carr with questions and suggestions, which he, in turn, answered and shared with the membership at large. Through such correspondence as well as visits to libraries and conversations at state and national library conventions with librarians serving immigrant clientele, Carr made the critical decisions regarding the publications most needed to advance the Americanization process.¹⁸

In addition to the *Guida*, the society also published and marketed other works for the immigrant. The first publication of the Society was *Immigrant and Library: Italian Helps, with Lists of Selected Books*. Written and compiled by Carr and issued in cooperation with the ALA Publishing Board, this publication was essentially a handbook or manual for librarians working with Italian immigrants.

The bibliographies in the handbook were based largely on the titles included in the Italian libraries provided by the Dante Alighieri Society. They were supplemented by titles gleaned from Italian bibliographies and publishers' announcements; bibliographies compiled by the public libraries of New York, Providence, and Springfield (MA); and a bibliography compiled by Marguerite Reid and John G. Moulton for the Massachusetts Library Club,



which was later published by the ALA.¹⁹

The second publication of the society, appearing in 1915, was "intended as a book of patriotism for the intelligent adult immigrant who has made a little progress in our language." Written by Emma Lilian Dana of the Model School of Hunter College, *Makers of America* was a collective biography of Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Abraham Lincoln. Carr, a bachelor in his late forties, married Dana within the year on 21 June 1916. Their brief marriage ended with her untimely death in 1921.²⁰ The third publication, *Foreigners' Guide to English* by Azniv Beshgeturian, a Boston school teacher of Armenian ancestry, was favored by Carr since it was geared to the needs of the adult immigrant.²¹

When it became increasingly evident that the United States would enter World War I, Carr's message assumed an even greater urgency. During this intense period, Carr wrote that "to the immigrant the library represents the open door of American life and opportunity."²²

Carr was impressed with the efforts of enthusiastic librarians in major centers of immigrant population. In his address at the Asbury Park (NJ) conference of the ALA, in 1916, he singled out for special commendation the libraries in New York, Chicago, St. Louis, Providence, Detroit, Pittsburgh, Louisville, Jersey City, Buffalo, Boston, Passaic, Altoona (PA), and Springfield (MA). "As I talk to these good librarian folk, I find myself always in an atmosphere of enthusiasm when we speak of work with our immigrants. They tell me—and I have collected hundreds of astounding instances—of miracles wrought, of affecting gratitude, of beautiful friendships formed."²³

He convinced three librarians to share their strategies employed to publicize the library to the immigrant community. Together, the three librarians wrote a pamphlet each. The pamphlets were edited and published by the Immigrant Publication Society between 1917 and 1919 under the Library Work with the Foreign Born series.

The first of the three pamphlets, *Bridging the Gulf; Work with the Russian Jews and Other Newcomers*, was written by Ernestine Rose, librarian of the Seward Park Branch of the New York Public Library. The second pamphlet in the series, *Winning Friends and Citizens for America;*

Work with Poles, Bohemians and Others, by Eleanor (Edwards) Ledbetter, retold her experiences as librarian of the Broadway Branch of the Cleveland Public Library. The third and last pamphlet in the series, *Exploring a Neighborhood: Our Jewish People from Eastern Europe and the Orient*, by Mary Frank, then superintendent of the Extension Division of the New York Public Library, recalled her experiences as librarian of the Rivington Street Branch.²⁴

Carr himself wrote and published two pamphlets for the Library Work with the Foreign Born series. The first, issued in 1916, *Some of the People We Work For*, was actually a reprint of his address to the Asbury Park (NJ) conference of the ALA. The second, issued in 1918, was *War's End: The Italian Immigrant Speaks of the Future*. This pamphlet focused, as did those of Rose, Ledbetter, and Frank, on the loyalty of immigrants to their adopted country. All of these pamphlets, published during and just after World War I, emphasized the fact that immigrants, despite the involvement of their homelands in the great European conflict, had demonstrated a renewed dedication to American democratic ideals.²⁵

During the last months of World War I, Carr was employed by the ALA to aid in the campaign to provide library books to men in the armed services. Working without an appropriation for advertising, Carr was able to collect almost single-handedly over 700,000 books in New York alone during the course of fifteen months. Armed with only a megaphone, he positioned himself on the steps of the magnificent central building of the New York Public Library, and there proved himself to be not only a good salesman and publicist. Through this ALA publicity work during World War I, Carr gained the respect of the ALA Executive Board members and other influential librarians on matters relating to library work with immigrants. Toward the end of World War I, in 1917, the ALA Executive Board appointed Carr as chairman of the newly formed Committee on Work with the Foreign Born, which officially began its thirty-year tenure at the close of the war, in 1918.

Continued next month...