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Henry James's America

by Stephen Miller

On the novelist's huddled masses.

Henry James is widely regarded as a writer who was deeply disturbed by the new immigrants who came to America after 1890—mainly Jews from Eastern Europe and Italians from Southern Italy and Sicily. James wrote about the new immigrants in *The American Scene* (1907), an account of his visit to the U.S. in 1904–1905 after an absence of two decades. In their introduction to a selection from *The American Scene* (1907), the editors of *Empire City: New York Through the Centuries* (2005) say, “James, revealing the patrician sensibility of his class, . . . recoiled at the sight of masses of immigrants.” James did not recoil at the sight of masses of immigrants. He went out of his way to see immigrants and talk to them. He not only visited Ellis Island, which opened in 1892, but he also walked in the Italian and Jewish sections of New York. He went to restaurants frequented by immigrants, and he...

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Stephen Miller's latest book is *Rollercoaster: A Life in Twenty-nine Jobs* (Outskirts Press).

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