

**Arab-American Faces and Voices: The Origins  
of an Immigrant Community**

*Elizabeth Boosahda*

*Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003. 288 pages.*

*Arab-American Faces and Voices: The Origins of an Immigrant Community* offers a detailed history of the lives of Arab immigrants in

Worcester, Massachusetts. Elizabeth Booshada conducted primary source research, interviewed nearly 200 people, and documented the immigrants' stories of their families' lives from 1880-1915. The author's personal and family connections to the community, in combination with the candid interview excerpts, provide a fascinating and much needed account of a people who survived, thrived in, and helped to create an important part of American society.

The book's main focus is to describe, from the perspectives of elderly immigrants of mainly Christian Arab ancestry, their experiences in the United States. Booshada gives a brief history of the Arab world at the time of their migration, and each chapter provides extensive depictions of their neighborhoods, workplaces, traditions, education, culture, the process of Americanization, and the legacies that they left to their progeny. Importantly, Booshada points out the complex and complicated socio-cultural and economic ties that these early sojourners, and eventually settlers, had to the Arab world and the Americas. For example, they traveled far and wide to be with family and to make a living.

The book is rich in description, especially regarding the voices of individuals as they remembered the hardships and successes of starting a business, getting married, joining the war effort at the turn of the twentieth century, practicing religion, or becoming American during politically difficult times. One of the book's main strengths is its great detail about the various streets and buildings in Worcester in which the early immigrants invested, occupied, or built. However, more could be said, for example, about how property, as well as the use of space for business, church, and family, contributed to an Arab and American identity-in-the-making.

While the book's descriptive dimension is compelling, especially in its presentation of photographs of community members, more analysis could have been focused on the various themes presented by the author. At times, she offers what seem to be long lists of things, such as the roles of women or Lebanese or Syrian food dishes, without relating these elements to an overall argument about identity and the immigrant experience. While the historical content, archival research, and first-hand accounts make this book a "must-read," the reader might be left with a nostalgic feeling for what was, rather than with a compelling set of arguments for what makes this community so important in the tapestry of immigration and Arab communities in today's world.

In light of its rich descriptive nature, *Arab-American Faces and Voices* is an excellent example of a book to be read alongside texts that focus generally on immigration. These books often do not include the experiences of Arab-Americans, and, as such, ignore the geopolitical, emotional, and sociocultural connections between the United States and the modern Middle East. Importantly, the book addresses the cultural, economic, educational, and religious diversity of early Arab-Americans and their progeny, and provides a helpful contrast to such works as Barbara Metcalf's *Making a Muslim Space in North America and Europe* (The University of California Press: 1996) and which, as the title implies, focuses on the recent and current immigration experiences of Muslim Arabs.

Also noteworthy are the book's addenda and appendices, which feature Arab-American organizations in their historical context, along with a genealogy of Booshada's family and a timeline of the Eastern Orthodox Syrian Church. The annotated suggested reading list and the list of organizations, collections, and exhibits provide excellent resources and documentation of Arab community life and activism in the United States.

While *Arab-American Faces and Voices* is not directly relevant to the study of Islam, it is clear that the experiences, customs, and language practices of the immigrants whose stories Booshada shares have much in common with Arabs of all faiths. As such, the book presents a unique window into the everyday lives of ordinary people, who, as in all immigrant cases, creatively reached out to one another to build a community and to succeed in their adopted country. This is evidenced in the chapter on Americanization, in which Booshada painstakingly accounts for the civic participation and service that the Worcester immigrants provided as new citizens. As a whole, the book serves as a testimonial of their participation in society, from the early peddlers who braved cold winters to sell their wares to appreciative households, to brilliant politicians and intellectuals, and to Booshada herself, who, in writing this book, offers the general public access to a little-known but significant population in New England. In a timely fashion, she weaves her story and their stories into American history.

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