Book Review

Robertson, Craig. 2010. *The Passport in America: The History of a Document*. New York: Oxford University Press.
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With the widespread adoption of the passport in the United States in the 1920s, the well-heeled classes were, according to Craig Robertson, Communications Studies at Northeastern University, indignant at the idea that they would have to prove who they were to travel. Sufficiently peeved, they declared the need for such a document a “nuisance”. It seems that this intrusive demand challenged the upper-crust’s assumption that a person’s appearance, character, and self-declared honorable name should be all the proof needed. Moreover, the fact that *everyone* was expected to produce this newfangled document cast them in with those on the margins of social life—criminals, mental defectives, and other reprobates—the ones in their minds clearly deserving of state monitoring.

Fast-forward nearly a century and the “passport nuisance” has been reconstituted and “solved” through the very techniques that were initially the object of scorn. Today, at nearly every major airport in the U.S., returning “law abiding” “low-risk” citizens can receive expedited passport clearance. “Members” in the exclusive “Global Entry: Trusted Traveler Network” club, sponsored by U.S. Customs and Border Protection, are pre-approved for entry. Rather than resisting state intrusion to certify their identity, these elite travelers have voluntarily subjected themselves to a rigorous background check, personal interviews, and bio-metric capture; they even paid an extra \$100US for the privilege! On arrival, these select voyagers go immediately to Global Entry kiosks, insert their machine-readable U.S. passport, and place their fingertips on the scanner. Quickly approved, the traveller is issued an entry receipt and they are off to the baggage claim and exit. No waiting in long lines with the common rabble who might well suffer the indignities of being interrogated in a backroom or body searched by inquisitive security agents.

Craig Robertson’s *The Passport in America: The History of a Document* is a new and important addition to the burgeoning literature on the genealogy of personal identification and documentation. Charting the history of the American passport from an early 19th century letter of introduction to foreign officials, to a certificate of citizenship, and on to a full-fledged identification document by the 1930s, Robertson offers us a well-documented piece of social history. Rather than weigh the text down with a heavy conceptual apparatus, his is a deceptively modest project where theory takes a back seat to basic empirical questions: “How were identities documented? What identities did people document? Who could document identity? For what social or institutional purpose did people document identities?” (p. 8). And Robertson’s narrative is arranged only quasi-temporally; his focus instead on crucial junctions in the development of what he calls, in a nod to Foucault, a “documentary regime of verification” (p. 10). One of the major strengths of this project is the way that Robertson situates the passport and all its components and uses in the broadly changing social and cultural context of both individual identity and national identity. As he puts it,

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“Collectively, this book uses the modern passport to examine what made the documentation of identity possible and what the documentation of identity made possible” (p. 8).

Robertson divides his book into two distinct sections. In the first, “Assembling the Passport”, his focus is on the social construction of identity and the necessary shift in thinking about individuality that was needed to establish the legitimacy of the passport. Up until this time, as I suggested above, the body and self-declarations—not documents and the certification of experts—were seen as the only viable means of personal identification. What needed to happen was the acceptance of the now taken-for-granted notion that an individual's identity could in fact be measured by external “experts” and hence known from documents alone. As Robertson puts it, “Documentation required a complicated rethinking of ideas of authenticity and the self, and the relationship of individual identity to the body, particularly how class, gender, and race were articulated to embody privilege” (p. 9).

Faced with this challenge, authorities deployed a number of techniques and technologies in their attempt to reliably communicate identity in documentation: personal name, signature, physical description, photograph, application form, and seal. The seal and all the symbols of officialdom underscored the legitimacy and authenticity of the issuing authority while the rest were intended to accurately identify the true bearer of the document. In this first section, Robertson takes each of these techniques in turn as entire chapters. I will highlight here just a few of the many intriguing illustrations he offers. In “Name”, Robertson puts in relief the problems created by idiosyncratic naming conventions and multiple spellings of surnames for bureaucratically “fixing” the identity of particular individuals. The implementation of the complex Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, for instance, which barred entry of some Chinese and not others, proved to be a challenge for immigration officials unfamiliar with Asian culture. Legions of other groups of immigrants to the U.S. changed their names as a “symbol of national membership” but also had their names changed for them to “simpler” Anglicized versions that would be easier to pronounce and standardize (p. 47).

The official fixing of names and the cultural specificity of naming practices collided again in the ways that married women were treated, initially identified on a husband's passport as simply “accompanied by his wife”. The start of WWI prompted security concerns and brought an end to joint passports; women were then issued documents in the family name of her husband. The practice became a target of feminists and in 1925 the State Department acquiesced and permitted a woman to have a passport issued in her maiden name followed by the phrase “wife of”. A dozen or so years later the “wife of” convention was made optional as well.

Chapters on “Signature” and “Photograph” reveal additional complexities and challenges in the adoption of identification technologies. A “proper signature” was one thought to be recognizable, unique, and repeatable, yet most were only vague approximations of the printed names on the documents and border officials had neither the time to request a reprise nor the training to authenticate them. Similarly, while a photograph was thought to be the essence of objective representation, it had to be read against the quality of the photography as well as an individual's changing appearance (e.g., age, dress, hair styles, etc.) making certain identification potentially problematic.

The second half of the book, “Using the Passport”, shifts focus from the document itself to how it was deployed, as Robertson claims, “...to serve the purpose of enforcing and policing new policies and laws intended to secure and protect the nation” (p. 11). Here he offers four chapters that function as case studies in how authorities attempted to use the documentation of identity to “manage difference”, as Robertson calls it, “in a period of racial instability, class transformation, and national volatility” (p. 5). In “Dubious Citizens” the author reveals how the ambiguous legal definition of citizenship in the 19th century created confusion about who could and could not be issued a passport. This ambiguity permitted, for example, the State Department to refuse to issue passports to a variety of individuals that it saw as socially, culturally or

politically questionable; from former Hungarian revolutionaries to Mormons who were suspected of traveling to recruit polygamists. But this vague definition also allowed repatriated naturalized U.S. citizens to repeatedly renew their passports in an effort to avoid military service in their homelands as well as certain classes of immigrants and newly freed African American slaves who applied for passports to use the documents to claim citizenship.

In “Suspicious People and Untrustworthy Documents”, we see burdened customs and immigration officials at Ellis Island casting a mistrustful eye on those arriving in the U.S. in cramped quarters of “steerage” class, paying almost no attention to identity documents and instead relying on their preconceived notions of what the suspect bodies of prostitutes, the diseased, “imbiciles”, and the lazy told them. Yet later, during WWI, Robertson claims there was a shift back to the importance of identity and documentation. In “Reading Documents, Reading Bodies, and Passport Control”, he argues that national security concerns, focusing on attempts to root out German spies and Bolsheviks as well as new efforts to control the movement of citizens abroad, took prominence. We see then a new “passport control” regime emerge with the introduction and enforcement of stricter application requirements and the decree that all people entering or leaving the U.S. had to present a valid passport. By the end of the 1930s, the modern passport was born; what was once the “benevolent state offering protection in the form of a letter addressed to foreign officials became a nation-state practicing surveillance to gain knowledge about its citizens” (p. 217).

The Passport in America is a well-written and insightful book that should be of interest to all those concerned with understanding the history of and the changing relationship between citizen and state in the modern era. I highly recommend it.