

Review Essay

Orm Øverland, *The Western Home: A Literary History of Norwegian America*. Northfield, Minnesota: Norwegian-American Historical Association, 1996. Distributed by University of Illinois Press. 442 pp.; ISBN 0-252-02327-7; hardcover; \$44.95.

The publication of this history of an American immigrant/ethnic literature should be hailed as an important event in the field of American Studies. Not only is it the first complete and comprehensive study of a branch of American literature written in a language other than English, but also it is a new kind of literary history. It includes a summary of the factual history of the Norwegian immigrant group that produced it; a survey of every conceivable genre of writing published, from letters through all kinds of nonfiction, journalism, drama, fiction and poetry popular and serious – even a long-running comic strip; a history of Norwegian-language publishing in the United States, from the earliest newspapers to full-grown publishing houses in the Upper Midwest; an account of how distribution systems for periodicals and books in Norwegian developed in the United States; reports on reader reaction to many works, especially contemporary literary criticism by fellow immigrants; biographical information about a host of writers together with an inventory and evaluation of their work that ranges from brief mention of the least important to a full chapter on each of the eight most outstanding; a discussion of the linguistic problems of writers whose language, cut off from its roots in Norway, was being undermined by the encroachment of English even as they wrote it. There is as much as or more cultural history and sociology of literature here than discussion of literary works. Perhaps too much? Let us see.

The 23 chapters of the book are organized in six sections that vary in length from one to nine chapters. Part One introduces in Chapter 1 'Vesterheimen: A Marginal and Transitional Culture.' Here Øverland explains the book's title and defines its subject and thesis.

In Old Norse 'Vesterheimen' meant 'the Western World,' but Norwegian Americans from 1875 on began using it literally as 'the Western Home,' meaning their own vaguely defined, widespread Norwegian-American social and cultural community. For a time its leaders believed this could continue indefinitely as a vital and separate sub-culture within multi-ethnic American life, but they were wrong. Today 'Vesterheimen' survives only as the name of the Norwegian immigrant museum in Decorah, Iowa, and in English translation as the title of this book.

(Øverland argues that the culture of Vesterheimen was necessarily isolated, transitional and marginal in relation to both its host and its homeland societies, yet Norwegian immigrants were Americans by choice and the literature they wrote in America for an American audience was American literature in the Norwegian language. Here and later he quotes many authors who insisted on this, as Øverland does too – more as an axiom than a thesis. At the close of his Chapter 1, however, he does present a carefully worded thesis: although most of Norwegian-language literature written by immigrants and their descendants, like any other literature, is of historical interest only, still the writers,

publishers, newspaper editors, readers, and all the others who collectively created it 'made up an American literary culture that did produce a handful of writers who should be taken into account whenever the American literary canon is reconsidered. This book is a contribution to such reconsiderations' (15).

Part Two, entitled 'Getting Started,' contains three chapters that depart most radically from usual literary histories. Chapter 2, 'Writing for a European Audience,' deals first with 'America letters' written by immigrants from the early 1830s on to family and friends back home. Defining literature as 'a body of texts addressed to a public audience' (19), Overland argues that the early letters collectively are a folk literature addressed 'to a readership that was not only potentially American but that to an amazing extent actually became American, often encouraged by their letters. If one measure of the quality of a literary text is its potential to move readers, the America letters deserve our attention' (19-20). Some immigrant letter-writers became widely known not only in the Norwegian peasant communities they addressed, where their letters were read aloud to all comers and copied by hand for distribution far and wide, but also in upper-class circles, where a number of letters the authorities got hold of were printed in newspapers and entered the public debate on emigration. Naturally representatives of both church and state warned against it, but 'the letters functioned as an underground literature which was effective precisely because it was not distributed through official channels' (20). However, by the 1860s the America letters had changed in both content and function from public to private documents, while emigrant guidebooks, newspapers, and pamphlets had become widespread. After analysis of different types of early letters and close reading of one as 'an effective and persuasive text' (23), Overland also gives close analysis to the first Norwegian emigrant guidebook written in America but brought back to Norway for publication in 1838. This reader finished Chapter 2 persuaded that letters and guidebooks can indeed be considered as literary genre.

Chapter 3, 'The First Newspapers,' and Chapter 4, 'The Genesis of Commercial Publishing 1847-1876,' are tough going for a non-specialist. Dense with detail, veritable thickets of names, dates, titles and quotations, these chapters survey the beginnings of Norwegian-language printing in the United States. As a specialist, however, I found Overland's description of this early publishing history fascinating because he had gone back to read so much of the early sources and quotes liberally from them. He demonstrates that Norwegian-American literature in the narrower sense of creative writing began with original poems in the first newspaper *Nordlyset* in 1847, and that this and other newspapers continued for the next quarter century to publish poetry, essays, sketches, and a little short fictional narrative written by immigrants themselves. They also reprinted much American and European writing, by the late 1850s even serialized novels in or translated to Norwegian. I have been wrong in dating Scandinavian-American literature from the first books of fiction and poetry published in the 1870s; however defined, this Norwegian-language literature was under way by 1850.

Chapter 4 traces the first pamphlets and books published in Norwegian, nonfiction motivated like the early newspapers by politics and religion. The 1850s saw mostly religious books and the first schoolbooks. The 1860s produced the first hymnals, how-to handbooks, and popular light reading such as the autobiography of the famous Norwegian

robber Gjest Baardsen, as well as the first (short-lived) secular magazines. In 1866 the newspaper *Skandinaven* was founded in Chicago; as one of the largest and most influential Norwegian immigrant newspapers, it also built up the most successful book-publishing business in Vesterheimen. In 1869 the newspaper *Fædrelandet og Emigranten* began printing serialized novels so that the pages could be cut out and sewn into books for the subscribers' own home libraries. This became standard practice for a number of immigrant newspapers for several decades, especially *Decorah-Posten* in Iowa, which for nearly a century before its demise in 1972 published a weekly literary supplement that was an important market for immigrant writers. Øverland traces the development of book distribution through newspaper ads for book agents and bookstores, which sold mainly through mail orders. However, he omits private reading circles and both public and private libraries that also helped bring books to Norwegian immigrant readers. Thus in the 1870s, with a reading public and publishing possibilities ready, book reviews and editorials in the periodical press began to call for 'an independent literary culture in our mother tongue in our new homeland' (66).

The following three parts of the book divide its account into three periods: 'A Literature Takes Shape, 1865-1880,' 'The Confident Years, 1880-1914,' and 'Culmination' on into the 1920s and 1930s, when both the literature of Vesterheimen and the ethnic culture that supported it came into full flower and then rapidly died out. For each period Øverland describes briefly the background history of the group: how it grew rapidly after the Civil War and founded a wide range of institutions, for a time looked as though it might continue indefinitely as a sub-culture, but then declined as immigration from Norway tapered off after the turn of the century and practically ended in the 1920s, while the natural forces of assimilation carried the children and grandchildren of earlier immigrants into the American mainstream. In all three sections Øverland deals in detail with both serious and popular literature, including the 'underbrush' of many amateur writers of both verse and fiction whose aesthetic quality is nil but whose historical value can be considerable as records of the concerns and values of their readers. In the third and fifth parts Øverland also includes surveys of non-fiction, but these are so broad that they become superficial and serve mainly as evidence that this immigrant literature did indeed become as wide in genre and subject and as varied in quality as any national literature, although in miniature. Part Six then introduces the six who, scholars in the field agree, were the most important authors in Vesterheimen.

I think Øverland succeeds in organizing his masses of historical fact and integrating it with his presentation of the literature so that the reader sees how a literary tradition grows within the developing culture of a group and serves important functions for it: expressing immigrant problems of identity and behavior, advocating models of how to solve these problems, interpreting immigrant experience to give it meaning, and recording many aspects of this transitional experience for the future. For some readers this will be the most important achievement of *The Western Home*, a contribution to basic theory on why and how literature is an important part of every civilized culture.

Other readers will use it as a reference work that gives excellent summaries of Norwegian-American publishing history or the debate between immigrant preservationists and assimilationists or their reaction to the anti-foreign hysteria of World War I. It is also

the first and so far the only author index for any non-English literature in the United States, including both major and minor writers and giving biographical information about them, summaries of their plots and themes, and evaluation of their worth both by contemporary critics and by Overland. An index of author names at the end of the book facilitates this function.

For most readers, however, the extensive chapters on Norwegian-American authors will be most important. The first to deal with a single author is Chapter 10 on Ole Amundsen Buslett, romantic idealist (1855-1924). Buslett was an autodidact who in 1882 was inspired to take on the exalted role of bard for his materialistic people. Most scholars consider him the first 'serious' Norwegian-American author, publishing lyric and narrative poetry, allegorical verse dramas, utopian and political novels, stories of social criticism, and finally in 1918 an autobiographical novel that was his crowning achievement: *Fra min ungdoms nabolag* (From the Neighborhood of my Youth). Overland goes through these worlds in considerable detail, pointing out confused plots, unclear symbolism, and exalted idealism. He quotes contemporary critics who were unanimous in their respect for Buslett but often complained they could not understand him. It took Buslett thirty years to learn to write well despite his considerable talent and formidable ambition; but when he finally abandoned his romantic idealism and turned to greater realism in portraying the immigrant life he knew, his last books greatly improved in quality. Overland gives high praise to his story *Veien til Golden Gate* (The Road to the Golden Gate) from 1915, an allegorical argument for cultural pluralism against melting-pot ideology. It is included in a new bilingual anthology of selections from non-English literature in the United States, *The Longfellow Anthology of American Literature* (eds. Marc Shell and Werner Sollors, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, Spring 1998). The Longfellow Institute was founded in 1994 by these two literature professors at Harvard University and plans an ambitious program to collect, catalogue, and republish significant American literary texts written in languages other than English. Overland's history of Norwegian-American literature has thus appeared at an opportune time, and should help stimulate many more histories of other American immigrant literatures – a field whose day seems to be dawning at last.

We should look at a few other authors significant enough to be given a full chapter. H.A. Foss (1851-1929) in Chapter 11 became in turn a well-known amateur author, publisher and/or editor of newspapers and a magazine, a political radical for some years, and then a successful grain merchant who grew considerably more moderate in his political views. Foss has the distinction of having written the all-time Norwegian-American best-seller: *Husmands-gutten* (The Cotter's Son, 1884/5), which was first serialized in *Decorah-Posten* and credited with bringing in so many new subscribers that it saved that newspaper from bankruptcy. In spite of its stock characters, stilted dialogue, melodramatic plot, and dreadful style, as a book it sold equally well among lower-class Norwegian readers in the United States and in Europe. Overland's bibliography records numerous reprintings and new editions for many years, the latest in Norway as late as 1984 to mark the book's centennial. Its popularity is partly explained by its plot: the honest, hard-working cotter's son, barred by class barriers in Norway from marrying his rich landlord's daughter, makes a fortune in America and returns just in time to buy the farm of the bankrupt drunken landlord at auction and live there happily ever after with his beloved, who had waited for him through thick and

thin. But equally important for its popularity were the novel's values: character superior to class, virtue rewarded with success, and American society based on the work ethic superior to the traditional, rigid class society of Europe.

These values Øverland traces in Foss's subsequent novels into the 1890s, which are much less known. They grow more radical in political view as his immigrant characters discover that the United States in this era of trusts and robber barons was not living up to its own ideals. Two novels were direct election propaganda, the first supporting the proposal to prohibit all alcohol in North Dakota in the state constitution in 1889, the second urging immigrant readers to vote for the new populist People's Party in 1892. The latter book, *Hvide slaver* (White Slaves), turns into a fin-de-siecle utopian novel that advocates socialism to save American democracy from the excesses of capitalism, which is turning the entire working class into white slaves. However, Foss's differs from American radical utopian novels of the time both by being more optimistic that basic reform was possible, and by adding an immigrant theme. Foss identifies the worst evils in American society as brought from corrupt Europe, so when immigrants join the best Americans in fighting for radical reform, they become true adopted Americans. Foss's last novel in 1927 records the dual threat to his ethnic group in that decade: from without, the anti-foreign 100% Americanism of World War I; from within, the natural pressures of second-generation acculturation. Although Foss's last novel was as poorly written as his first, Øverland points out that all his books reflect and record 'the shifting dominant concerns of the Norwegian-American Midwest' (155).

There is a serious flaw in Øverland's treatment of the six major immigrant authors in Part Six. He often fails to state clearly what standards he is judging them by, those of an ethnic or a national literature. His thesis for this book stated on page 15, that he wishes to present 'a handful of writers who should be taken into account whenever the American literary canon is reconsidered,' assumes both this double set of standards and that they change. In Chapter 9, where Øverland presents dense thickets of 'an underbrush of books and magazines that were quickly forgotten' in Norwegian-American Literature but 'were most visible and read in their own time,' he distinguishes these from 'that select group of authors and titles that make up the canon of a culture' (121). Every literature has then its own canon with its own standards, but Øverland makes no attempt to define what these are or the differences between them in the case of either Norwegian-American or American literature. The whole question of literary canons is so hotly disputed today that I think Øverland should have stated his position. As a contribution to the debate on standards and methods in defining and judging ethnic literature, I strongly recommend a recent article by Peter Thaler, 'A Methodological Approach to Activist Ethnic Literature,' in *Norwegian-American Studies*, Vol. 34 (Northfield: Norwegian-American Historical Association, 1995), 217-243. This throws a great deal of light on this murky issue.

In Chapter 18 Øverland fails to give any summarizing judgment at all on the literary value of the oeuvre of Simon Johnson (1874-1970). I find only praise of 'the broad sweep of historical and social themes as well as landscapes in Johnson's best work' (279), but Øverland never says what he thinks Johnson's best work is. He criticizes Johnson's outmoded romantic idealism (especially in characterization) and his stilted style, and calls his last published novel (1925) a failure; he lists Johnson's many short stories in the

bibliography but mentions only one (in a footnote); and he retells the plots of Johnson's five published novels from which his themes emerge. Johnson was a forerunner of Rølvaag in seeing the collective grandeur of Norwegian pioneers establishing civilization on the Great Plains, and in criticizing the materialism and competition that grew among them. Like Rølvaag he too opposed the rapid Americanization of his fellow immigrants. In my opinion Johnson was almost as good as Rølvaag in observing Norwegian immigrant life, but too poor a writer to have more than historical interest for a literary critic. This is my opinion, however; Overland fails to give us his.

Dorthea Dahl (1881-1918) Overland finds was a better artist than Johnson, but she wrote only about 'close interiors' and 'the minutiae of domestic life' (279) in small-town congregations and ladies' aid societies. From this unpromising material she created convincing characters playing out credible conflicts of more compelling interest than Johnson's. Overland presents quite a few of her many short stories published in both Norwegian and English, but he is most impressed by her one novel in Norwegian: *Byen paa berget* (The City on the Hill, 1925). He claims that all previous critics of this book have failed to understand it, but its significance is plain to him. Unfortunately he has misinterpreted a University of Oslo Master's thesis from 1977 he has read that did understand this novel too. He says this thesis 'was mainly interested in the extent to which the novel was 'a faithful account of Dakota pioneer days' (288), but this was only one of its aims. I refer Professor Øverland to pages 126-127 of the 1977 thesis, where it gives exactly the same interpretation of the book's title and its main theme as he does: that the small-town lives of the novel's heroine and her husband, humble and dull though they may seem to be, were truly spent in the service of God and therefore shine as models to all like lights in the night from a city upon a hill. Overland concludes that this novel 'is a remarkable achievement and a valuable contribution to the literature of Vesterheimen' (291). I agree that it is one of the best Norwegian-American novels, but would he nominate it to be considered for the general American literary canon too? Since he has included Dorthea Dahl in his 'handful of writers who should be taken into account whenever the American literary canon is reconsidered,' he ought to answer that question, but he does not even ask it.

Johannes B. Wist (1864-1923), the subject of Chapter 21, was a full-time journalist who served as chief editor of the important *Decorah-Posten* for many years. He was a genial satirist whom Øverland among others compares to Sinclair Lewis. Among much else Wist wrote a novel trilogy (1920-1922) and some short stories that are among the best in Norwegian-American literature. The trilogy traces the rise of one Jonas Olsen from ditchdigger in Minneapolis in the mid-1880s, through his farming years in the Red River Valley in volume two, to his full dominance of a small prairie town in volume three – completely free of moral and intellectual values, always eager to get ahead, and as smart in business and politics as the Yankees he gets the better of time after time. Overland gives an excellent summary of these three novels and concludes: 'Wist's trilogy is not merely his best work, unique in the literature of Vesterheimen, but it is also a portrait of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Upper Midwest that deserves a place in American literature along with the other fiction of this region from the 1920s' (321). At last, a clear judgment based on the criteria for regional literature, although these are still not defined.

The last two authors Overland presents are Waldemar Ager (1869-1941) and Ole E. Rølvaag (1876-1931). Both are well known to students of Norwegian America, and have experienced a renaissance of attention from literary scholars in recent years. A full-length biography of Ager by Einar Haugen came in 1989, while Rølvaag has four biographies as well as several full books and numerous articles of critical analysis to his credit. Both of these authors also had novels published in their lifetime by major publishers in Oslo, Ager three and Rølvaag all but one of his, a certain sign of superior literary quality; while Rølvaag broke strongly through into American literature with his best-selling *Giants in the Earth* (New York, 1927) and then saw four of his other novels republished in English translation by Harper of New York. In his lifetime Ager had only his last novel published in English translation by Harper, *I Sit Alone* (1931), but in 1983 the University of Nebraska Press put out his novel of 1926 as *Sons of the Old Country*, and in 1995 his satirical *On the Way to the Melting Pot* (1917) was republished in translation in the Prairie Classics series of the Prairie Oak Press in Madison, Wisconsin. Clearly Ager is moving into the regional canon of Midwestern literature, while Rølvaag has long been prominent there as well as appearing in the general American literary canon. Any Americanist reading this journal who does not know these two best Norwegian-American authors is strongly urged to read Overland's brief accounts of them and then read at least one novel by each. Since its original publication in English *Giants in the Earth* has never been out of print, and Ager's recently republished titles are readily available.

However, I have two minor objections to Overland's account of Rølvaag. In his discussion of *The Boat of Longing* (1921|1933) Overland omits the reason Rølvaag gives for the crucial decision of his protagonist Nils to leave Minneapolis, stop writing to his parents in Norway, and begin the life of aimless wandering with which his story ends. Overland says the reason is just Nils' weak character (355), but Rølvaag provides much better motivation than that. Nils's comrade from the Old Country has disappeared, and since Nils had promised the young man's parents back home to watch over him, he sets out to try to find him without having any idea of where to go. He cannot bear to write home to Norway as long as his promise remains broken, so he too disappears into the maelstrom of America. My other objection is the way Overland presents the plots of the last two novels of Rølvaag's prairie trilogy, with so many short phrases quoted from the texts run into his own sentences that I came to feel I was climbing over barbed wire fences, every quotation 'mark another barb. I would have preferred a retelling of the plot in his own words, as he has done so often before. However, together with all other scholars in the field, I certainly agree with Overland's final evaluation of Rølvaag: 'His work is the most valuable literary contribution of Vesterheimen, its main offering to the multi-ethnic national literature of the United States' (368). I would only raise the question of what 'multi-ethnic' means in this sentence: is it modifying the criteria for the American national literary canon?

A brief section entitled 'Coda' brings this long book to an end. Overland marshals the historical developments that made inevitable the rapid decline and end of Vesterheimen as a living culture and therefore the death of its literature: the Quota Acts of the 1920s that ended large-scale immigration, the natural processes of Americanization, the disintegration of the Norwegian language not only from the pressure of English but also because of rapid changes in the language in Norway, the disappearance of nearly all

Norwegian-language organs of publication in the 1930s or shortly after. Strangely he does not mention the economic devastation of all American publishing in the Great Depression but seems to think that the dying out of the first generation alone caused the disappearance of so many Norwegian-language periodical publications and book publishers so fast.

Here Øverland introduces less-known information about Rølvaag that might better have been included in Chapter 23. As professor of Norwegian at St. Olaf College in Minnesota, Rølvaag was the only Norwegian-American author who kept up with language change in the homeland and who could write it fluently and correctly in its contemporaneous form. This made him preeminently publishable in Oslo but all too radical in language for publication in the American Midwest. When the Norwegian version of *Giants in the Earth* was to be published as a serial in *Decorah-Posten*, its language had to be edited back to an older form and its content bowdlerized to remove swear-words and sexual innuendoes it was feared would offend Norwegian Americans in 1927. Even then Rølvaag was subjected to strong criticism from his fellow immigrants and 'attacks questioning his moral integrity and his fitness for service as a teacher of the young in a church institution' (378). He narrowly escaped being fired from St. Olaf College.

Øverland has previously discussed how and why Norwegian-American literature and culture was so much more prudish, conservative, and old-fashioned in moral and political attitudes and behavior than Norwegian (178-179, 190-195). And it seems that this general disposition of the ethnic group has survived to the present day. A new book by Odd Lovoll due for publication in both English and Norwegian this year (1998), *The Promise Fulfilled?*, is based on ten thousand questionnaires, a thousand interviews in depth, and many telephone interviews during surveys in thirty states of present-day descendants of Norwegian immigrants of all ages and classes, plus extensive historical research in census, police, church, and other records, by Lovoll and his assistants. The first of its kind, this project sought to answer the question of what has become of the Norwegian ethnic group since the 1930s. Norwegian newspaper accounts when Lovoll announced his results last year reported the majority were found to be conservative, self-satisfied, middle class with a strong group self-image of being honest, hard-working, law-abiding American citizens still proudly entrenched in their Lutheran church loyalty and their traditional social, political, and moral conservatism. They did not like it at all that Lovoll found there had been many blonde Norwegian prostitutes in Chicago in the last century, or that he documented tendencies toward racism in their midst today.

So it was almost in spite of itself that the sub-culture of Vesterheimen produced the wide-ranging and variegated literature that is recorded in Øverland's literary history. In their own special Norwegian language its writers expressed their American experience to an American audience and 'collectively created a record of the emotional and social life of one ethnic group on its way from being migrant Europeans to integrated, indeed largely indistinguishable members of American society' (380). This transition has become a pattern followed by all American immigrant groups, and in his last sentence Øverland calls for them too to add their literary histories to the literary history of the United States. Until they do, it will remain incomplete.

I would especially appeal to the Swedish, Danish, Finnish, and Icelandic readers of this journal to undertake study of their own emigrant literatures in the United States. As

Americanists who are qualified to understand your own branches of Nordic-American writing by your native background in Europe, you like Øverland can bring special insight to American ethnic literature as a research field. However, one aspect of this insight that Øverland has omitted I hope you would include. He makes no attempt to survey influences on Norwegian-American writers by literary models popular and serious in the homeland, especially in the nineteenth century. He mentions Bjørnson's peasant novels as models for the early fiction, but nothing else except the negative example of bohemian and realistic late-nineteenth-century Norwegian literature. All the comparisons Øverland makes are from American literature, while from Rølvaag's biographies I know he at least was strongly influenced by the epic perspective of such Norwegian authors as Knut Hamsun, Olav Duun, and Sigrid Undset. In any hyphenated literature influences from both sides of the hyphen should be considered.

However, if you undertake such study you will not have the help of such an immense amount of preliminary research as this book has been able to build on. You will not have anything as comprehensive as the Thor M. Andersen Bibliography (TMA), which went on-line in March 1997 and is now available on Internet from the Oslo University Library at this address: <http://www.nbo.uio.no/baser/tma.html>. This bibliography was begun in 1930 as a lifetime project by librarian Thor M. Andersen (1897-1979). He listed on hand-written cards over 55,000 entries for documents printed between 1825 and 1930 by and/or about Norwegian emigrants to the United States and Canada. Included are references to books and pamphlets as well as articles in newspapers and periodicals published throughout the world. He also registered biographical information about the writers of most documents. He estimated that he had recorded about 60% of all such materials published in the US and Canada in his target period, and the Oslo University Library hopes to bring and keep it up-to-date. This bibliography led Øverland to much of the biographical and critical material that he uses so well.

Øverland's book is part of a renewed wave of scholarship about Vesterheimen in both the United States and Norway stimulated partly by the ethnic revival in the United States in the 1970s, and partly by celebration of the 150th anniversary in 1975 of the beginning of organized Norwegian migration to America. To be sure, the Norwegian-American Historical Association with headquarters and archives at St. Olaf College in Minnesota had steadily carried on its program of research and publication under the leadership of professional historians since its founding in 1925, but the sesquicentennial brought out a number of new scholars who were more oriented toward social and cultural history. For one thing, as a direct result of this celebration I was allowed to offer a new graduate seminar on Norwegian-American literature and history in the American Institute at Oslo University, on the basis of which two dozen *hovedfag* (Master's-level) theses were written on Norwegian-American literature. Professor Bverland served as outside examiner for most of these and was motivated to begin the study which resulted in this book. For another thing, the University of Oslo Press discovered that no Norwegian history of emigration to America was in print and commissioned a Norwegian-American professor at St. Olaf to write a new one. Odd S. Lovell published *Det løfterike landet* in 1983, and its translation, *The Promise of America*, the year following in a completely new style, with oversize format, a superabundance of pictures, and unprecedented emphasis on social and

cultural aspects of Vesterheimen – such as previously unmentionable problems like immigrant drunkenness, crime, and prostitution, and a full chapter on immigrant language and literature. A second, revised edition of Lovoll's book appeared in 1997. For a third thing, a few Norwegian scholars meeting in 1982 to discuss how to launch Lovoll's new history book decided to found a Norwegian chapter of the Norwegian-American Historical Association (NAHA-Norway). This chapter held its first seminar on Norwegian-American history and Literature at Høvikodden (Oslo) in 1984 in connection with an exhibition on emigration to mark Lovoll's book, with lectures and papers by both Norwegians and Americans. The sixth NAHA-Norway seminar on Norwegian-American Studies took place in Trondheim in June of 1997, now following the schedule of a seminar every three years. So far five books of essays on Norwegian-American Studies based on papers and lectures presented at these seminars have seen the light of day, and a sixth is under preparation.

The trend toward social and cultural history is clearly present in these seminar books, and the last two or three of them show another rapidly growing trend toward comparison of two or more American ethnic groups in the same work. There are now many book-length studies of this latter type appearing in the field of ethnic history every year, where Norwegians are only part of the picture. Such comparative projects are especially fruitful in urban history, to which historians of Norwegian America have been turning recently after years of neglect. Odd S. Lovoll's *A Century of Urban Life: The Norwegians in Chicago before 1930* (Northfield: Norwegian-American Historical Association, 1988) is limited to one ethnic group but includes full accounts of Norwegian immigrant social and cultural life in that city. David Mauk's *The Colony that Rose from the Sea: Norwegian Maritime Migration and Community in Brooklyn, 1850-1910*, the 1997 publication of NAHA, not only describes urban forms of Norwegian-American social and cultural experience but also argues with full evidence that the Norwegian maritime community was a prototype for other ethnic maritime communities all over the world, formed by European mariners in the nineteenth century and Asian mariners in the twentieth. Mauk will begin a two-year project to write the history of Norwegians in Minneapolis/St. Paul in the summer of 1998.

These three trends (interdisciplinary, comparative, and urban) are also evident in the annual publications of the Norwegian-American Historical Association, for example the bilingual edition with full scholarly apparatus of *Han Ola og Han Per: A Norwegian-American Comic Strip* in 1984 and *Material Culture and People's Art among Norwegians in America* (ed. Marion Nelson) in 1994. The trends can also be seen in NAHA's series of article collections published at irregular intervals as hard-cover books under the collective title of *Norwegian-American Studies*. The latest of these, Volume 34, appeared in 1995. The table of contents that opens each volume, and the list of 'Some Recent Publications' (both books and articles) that closes every one, show not only increasing numbers of studies in social, cultural, and literary history but also 'straight' history that is permeated more and more with social and cultural elements. Actually the first history book in our Norwegian-American field to adopt a thoroughly interdisciplinary approach did not come from NAHA but from the Cambridge University Press in its series 'Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Modern History' in 1985. Jon Gjerde's *From Peasants to Farmers: The*

Migration from Balestrand, Noway, to the Upper Middle West is now a classic. It treats in detail nearly all aspects of Norwegian peasant adaptation to rural America: economic, behavioral and cultural patterns of all kinds involved in change from peasant to bourgeois life-style. Tables, charts, and diagrams are interspersed with photographs and citations from letters and Norwegian-American fiction to make this history a fascinating story.

I believe that Orm Overland's *The Western Home* may also become a classic as a new kind of literary history that introduces to a much larger public a long-neglected area of American literature. I regret that the author does not define better his standards for judging ethnic as against regional or national literature, nor make clear in all cases his evaluation of specific authors' works by these varying standards. When he does, I do not always agree with his judgment either. In particular I think he greatly overrates the works of the Norwegian-American authors Ole Buslett and Jon Norstog; future literary critics will have to decide between us. However, these are relatively minor points of criticism in a book of such wide scope.

One final question: is Øverland's new kind of literary history too long, too detailed, too exhaustive? I would say both yes and no: yes, for the general reader and the literary specialist who want only a traditional account of the best authors of Vesterheimen; no for everyone else, especially for us Americanists interested in almost everything. Especially valuable is Overland's 42-page bibliography of Norwegian-American texts, which includes large numbers of items from periodical publications. This far surpasses my bibliography from 1974, and our two are the fullest ones ever printed. I think *The Western Home* will most often be read selectively, in accord with readers' own interests. Then they can skip or skim whatever they find useless or tedious, which others might find essential. I am tired of the constant retelling of plots in third-rate novels, but another researcher might need just that. Therefore I hail this book as a pioneering work of prodigious scholarship. I hope it finds a wide and varied readership.

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