

Frederick Hale, ed., *Danes in North America*. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1984. xx+ 231 pp.

Letters have bridged the Atlantic since the earliest days of emigration from Scandinavia to America. They have long been recognized as documents of considerable historical and human value. Often, they were written by ordinary people, moved by the experiences of emigration to write home, and, as H. Arnold Barton put it, "for the first time in human history, the common man began to speak directly to posterity"

Frederick Hale conceived of *Danes in North America* as a companion volume to the earlier editions of Norwegian-American immigrant letters by Theodore C. Blegen (1955) and Swedish-American letters by Barton (1975). A brief review of those works will throw light on Hale's volume.

Blegen, a pioneer in the study of immigrant correspondence, wove hundreds of letters into what has been described as a "folk history" of America. He divided his material into eighteen chapters in a fundamentally chronological arrangement that followed the course of Norwegian settlement westwards across America. Intermixed within the chronological and regional framework were topical chapters on such subjects as the image of America, the Atlantic crossing, and religion. Some whole chapters were devoted to a single correspondent: a well-educated feminist in Texas, a Lutheran pastor in Wisconsin, or a farm wife on the Iowa frontier. Most of Blegen's letters had originally been published in Norwegian newspapers during the years of emigration, though some of the individual collections were personal letters. All in all, Blegen saw the letters as a fundamental source for what he called "grassroots history" — the history of the common people — and as the most important single "pull" factor in the process of transoceanic migration.

Barton arranged his collection of Swedish-American letters in three broad chapters, moving chronologically from the pioneer period of settlement in the eastern half of the North American continent, to the era of mass immigration and westward expansion following the Civil War, and on to the hard times and increasing urbanization around the turn of the century. Each section had an introductory essay of ten or twelve pages. These introductory essays, together with the epilogue, comprised a brief, judicious history of the Swedes in America, which was then enlivened by the vivid personal details of the letters themselves. Barton included more personal letters than Blegen, and fewer letters to editors. He was also able to present some collections of letters by a single correspondent, including a memorable collection by a governess in South Carolina, commenting on southern gentility and slavery

In a sense, Hale's collection pales in comparison with Blegen and Barton. His 250 pages lack the expansive scope of Blegen's 450 pages, or even of Barton's 350. Moreover, Hale has allowed topical considerations to prevail over chronological, regional, and individual factors in arranging the letters. The topics of his ten chapters, in and of themselves, are good ones: the Atlantic crossing, farming, the Wild West, urban America, politics, ethnic pluralism, religious pluralism, Danish identity, women, and disillusionment. But the topical arrangement leads to chronological confusion, and this is compounded by the subtopical and regional arrangement within the chapters. History, after all, is fundamentally a study of continuity and change in time,

and the jumbled chronology of Hale's edition makes this difficult to perceive. Because most courses on immigration follow a chronological pattern, it will also make the book difficult to use as a textbook.

The complex processes of assimilation can be studied in a collection of letters by a single author. This factor is obscured, however, because Hale has broken up such collections and scattered the letters under topical headings.

Hale relied quite heavily on letters to editors, rather than personal letters. Eighty-eight of his 123 letters were originally printed, shortly after they were written, in nineteenth century Danish (or, in a few cases, Scandinavian-American) periodicals. Letters to editors often contain more general information, and Blegen rated them highly as a "pull" factor, but they lack the intimate and immediate frankness of personal letters. Some of Hale's "letters" were actually official reports, such as those from Danish-American churchmen to their various denominational organs in Denmark.

Of the remaining letters in Hale's edition, fifteen came directly from Danish manuscript sources and twenty from printed editions in the Danish language. Almost none of the letters have previously been published in the English language. Hale's great contribution has been to bring them together and make them available in translation.

The chronological distribution of the letters is as follows:

1841-1860	12
1861-1870	14
1871-1880	17
1881-1890	45
1891-1900	26
1901-1915	10

Because Hale has relied so heavily on letters to editors, adult males are over-represented. Only eight of his 123 letters were written by women. Occupational groups represented include pioneers and farmers (25 letters), clergy of various denominations (19), clerks and shopkeepers (12), urban laborers (12), farm laborers (8), housewives (6), skilled laborers (6), and even a scattering of sailors, teachers, journalists, capitalists, and others. There is a good selection of letters describing urban conditions, including thirty-three from individuals of indeterminate occupation.

Hale's book should not be seen only in the context of Blegen and Barton but should also be considered within the tradition of earlier works on Danish immigrant letters. The deepest roots of this tradition are literary rather than historical. Danish authors of the nineteenth century, including St. St. Blicher and J.P. Jacobsen, loved to weave real or imagined documents from the past *into* their romantic tales. Wilhelm Dinesen ("Boganis") brought the theme of America into the Danish epistolary tradition of literature with his *Jagtbreve* (1889), as O.E. Rølvaag ("Paal Mørck") did with his *Amerika-breve* (1912).

The first serious editor of Danish emigrant letters was a novelist and man of letters, Karl Larsen. Shortly after the turn of the century, he collected over 8,000 letters from Danes abroad, and he published a four-volume selection of them, *De der tog hjemmefra*, in the years 1912-14. In the manner of an epistolary novelist, Karl Larsen wove collections of letters into stories that revealed

complex transformations of human character under the impact of changing external circumstances. His vivid and sometimes shockingly naturalistic portraits resulted in a transformation of the image of the emigrant in Denmark. The people who wrote Karl Larsen's letters were neither heroic adventurers, pitiful misled wretches, nor rich uncles with golden watch chains. Instead, they were individuals whose own words revealed them as complex, moving, sometimes rootless, and often ultimately tragic figures: a colonial official in Africa who had spent a happy boyhood in Aalborg; a ne'er-do-well thatcher who became a prosperous and respected prairie farmer; a vivacious young lady who was gradually brutalized by her own pride and a harsh Midwestern environment.

It could be claimed that Karl Larsen's approach has remained the dominant one among editors of Danish emigrant letters, including H.F. Feilberg (1912-27), B. Mahler (1975), and Erik Helmer Pedersen and associates (1981). All of these scholars have concentrated on extensive collections of letters from a given correspondent or family. This approach emphasizes the human side of the emigrant experience, and it also has certain advantages from the historical point of view, as Erik Helmer Pedersen has pointed out in *Brev fra America; Danske udvandrerbreve 1874-1922* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1981). It allows the historian to evaluate the overall quality of commentary by a given correspondent in writing. Moreover, it allows the historian to study the complex process of assimilation as the correspondent abandons aspects of a Danish identity and assumes the habits and attitudes of a North American.

Hale's topical approach, and his focus upon the individual letter rather than collections of letters, represents a radical break with this Danish tradition of editing. Why did he make the break? Apparently because he preferred the more public character of letters to editors over the personal and individual character of private correspondence.

It is not my intention to end this review on a critical note. Hale's book is a good one. He has done a pioneering job and has made a large collection of Danish immigrant letters come alive for the first time in the English language. Here is a letter from a farm laborer, slaving in the hot harvest sun and then given only water, not beer, to quench his thirst. Here are the grime, crowded conditions, bad food, and thieving Poles and Hungarians on an Inman Line steamer across the Atlantic. Here is a miner in Colorado, watching the rapid construction of a boom town and in his very next letter describing how it all burned down. Here is an ex-convict become prosperous and pious, and there, an enraged socialist, ranting at American politics and society. Here is a column of Danish Mormons on the long trek across the plains, there an itinerant clergyman, travelling up and down the Hudson valley by railroad. Here is a young woman, enchanted with the beautiful valleys of Utah and with the dashing uniforms of the American soldiers, and there, a fashionable Danish belle who describes the summer of 1891, spent in yachting and beach parties around New York, while a pioneer farm wife grows melancholy at the thought of home in Denmark and is ashamed that her cracked fingers make it so hard to write.

Some of the letters are so moving that a single one is worth the price of the volume. Jens Storm Schmidt's account of his incredible journey through deserts and bandit country from Texas to the California gold fields in 1859-50

in one such letter. Johanne Frederiksen's plucky, detailed menu for feeding seventeen threshers their three meals a day in 1912 is another.

Here indeed is a splendid collection, offering a rich array of glimpses into the lives of Danish immigrants in North America. The book is fairly well illustrated, handsomely printed, and bound in sturdy buckram.

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