

Book Reviews

RECENT BOOKS ON IMMIGRATION AND ETHNIC STUDIES

Rochelle Wright and Robert L. Wright, *Danish Emigrant Ballads and Songs*. Music Arranged and Transcribed by Richard P. Smiraglia. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983. 302 pages.

Danish Emigrant Ballads and Songs is the fourth volume in a projected series of seven annotated collections of emigrant songs. The series was initiated by Robert L. Wright, while this volume of Danish songs is largely the work of Rochelle Wright. Her introduction provides an excellent context for the songs, their mode of production and distribution, and their relation to current events. Rochelle Wright has succeeded in tracking down the melodies to most of the songs, thus making her volume not only a useful reference work for the scholar and fascinating reading for a general audience, but a find for the performer as well.

The title is slightly misleading in that all but a handful of the songs are Danish songs *about* emigration and not songs used by the emigrants themselves: "Although Danes who left their native land no doubt encountered emigrant street ballads before their departure, the evidence suggests that few of these songs survived the ocean journey" (p. 6). Most were originally published as *skillingsviser*, street ballads generally "printed on four small pages ... on the front or title page appeared a woodcut illustrating the contents of the primary song" (p. 3). These street ballads "served as the mass media of the nineteenth century" (p. 4), and could occasionally appear on the streets with a sensational rendering of the latest disaster or scandal before the newspapers were able to bring the story. Rochelle Wright's selection demonstrates the impact of emigration on the popular mind and gives valuable insight into the social and cultural background of Danish emigration.

The largest publisher of street ballads was the popular Copenhagen publisher Julius Strandberg, who wrote many of the songs himself. Strandberg was a popular writer among the immigrants in America as well and his volumes of humorous sketches, *Md. Petersens logerende. Humoristiske Fortællinger*, were published by Skandinavens Boghandel (1892) in Chicago as well as by Capital Publishing Company in St. Paul (n.d.). In Copenhagen one of Strandberg's best-selling items was the popular songbook *Den syngende Mand paa Bølge og Land*. In Chicago, one of the bestsellers on *Skandinaven's* list was *Den syngende Mand paa Sjø og Land*. Although the latter volume has much specifically Norwegian material, it has many *skillingsviser* related to those in the Wright collection. None of the songs in the American songbook, however, has any reference to either emigration or the immigrant experience.

One could speculate on the reasons for this difference in the songs that were popular on the two sides of the Atlantic. Perhaps some are suggested by the marked contrast between the Danish popular ballads on emigration collected by Rochelle Wright and the six Danish-American songs she has included, four by the Lutheran clergyman, novelist, poet and travel writer Adam Dan, and all of them Grundtvigian in their appeals to "Danishness" and idealism. The

selection of Danish-American songs suggests that when Danish-Americans sang about their own experience they could indeed be sentimental, but they were serious, both about their longing, their sense of identity, and, not least, their commitment to their new country. The themes of the popular Copenhagen street ballads on emigration themes were too close to home in Chicago or Cedar Rapids for the distance implied in the style of the *skillingsviser*. The immigrants enjoyed Julius Strandberg and other popular literature from Denmark but would tend toward the sententious in their own immigrant songs.

Rochelle and Robert Wright have given us a valuable volume in *Danish Emigrant Ballads and Songs*. Robert Wright has also published a volume of *Swedish Emigrant Ballads* (1965) while Norwegian ones are available in the collections by Theodore Blegen and Martin Ruud (1936) and Svein Amundsen and Reimund Kvideland (1975).