

Book Reviews

Erik Helmer Pedersen, *Drømmen om Amerika* (The Dream of America) Politikens forlag, København 1985.

The study of Scandinavian emigration to America has been enriched by two major books in the past couple of years. Odd Lovoll's *The Promise of America* (Minneapolis, 1984) was published in Norwegian as *Det løfterike landet* by Norwegian University Press (1983). Now Erik Helmer Pedersen's *Drømmen om Amerika* (The Dream of America, 1985) has appeared in Politikens's series on the history of the Danes outside Denmark. It is the first attempt to write a detailed account of Danish immigrant experience in relation to contemporaneous American history. Although Helmer Pedersen constantly warns that scholarly study of this field is in its infancy, his book sums up what has been achieved so far. It presents Helmer Pedersen's own research as well as his extensive reading in both primary and secondary sources, including unpublished student theses at Danish universities since the 1970s.

Information about the Danish background is largely limited to demographic patterns in the nineteenth century. In contrast, there is a great deal of information about America in Helmer Pedersen's work. He includes both Canada and South America (mainly Brazil and Argentina), but the bulk of the book is reserved for the United States, where more than 90% of the Danish immigrants went. Helmer Pedersen's training as an economic historian enables him to present a detailed – sometimes unnecessarily detailed – picture of American economic development. In contrast, there is less information about political, social, and especially cultural trends in the United States, and some of this is questionable. An example is a passage (p. 256) claiming that political structures changed radically toward the end of the nineteenth century. Local self-government declined as “the political authorities began to rule society from above!” In fact, such trends had begun long before that period and culminated long after it, while counter tendencies abounded at the same time. Fortunately, most generalizations are modified more carefully. The discussions of changing American attitudes toward immigration and assimilation, for instance, are excellent.

The story of Danish immigrant experience in the United States makes up the main body and the heart of the book. Helmer Pedersen carries the story much beyond Kristian Hvidt's pioneering effort in *Danes Go West* (1976). The general outline is the same as for Norwegians in Odd Lovoll's *The Promise of America*: 1) the first phase of forerunners who establish bridgeheads in the new land and send back letters and accounts about it; 2) slow growth in organized group emigration, mainly whole families in search of land to farm, down to the Civil War; 3) from the late 1880s, rapid growth in mass emigration of individuals, an increasing number of whom are workers settling in urban areas; 4) decline in the 1890s but growth again after the turn of the century with ever more immigrants of higher skills; 5) mass emigration ended temporarily by World War I and the Quota Acts of the 1920s; 6) small post-World War II immigration continuing to the present day, consisting mainly of highly skilled individuals. Within this general outline, the differences of Danish from Norwegian

and Swedish immigrant experience are striking, especially regarding the quantity and timing of emigration. Helmer Pedersen's contrast of inter-Scandinavian immigrant experiences, however, is more sporadic in social and cultural matters, and very little is done in the area of political life.

Danish emigration began later and remained much smaller than that of Norwegians and Swedes. Helmer Pedersen traces how the first emigrant guide-books published in Norway and the subsequent public debate there in the 1840s over the pros and cons of emigration attracted attention in Denmark and contributed to the first emigration phase just beginning in that country. Here the vanguard, as shown by the evidence so far, seems to have been better-educated individuals, while the first organized group departures were by Mormons (and to a lesser extent Baptists) in the 1850s. Throughout all phases Danes established many fewer colonies of their own kind than the other two nationalities, but instead distributed themselves more widely and thinly across the continent, especially in urban areas, and therefore created much less of their own ethnic sub-culture and were more rapidly assimilated. However, a small group within their number, the Grundtvigian Lutherans, did establish a special sub-culture, some aspects of which have remained alive to the present day. A few other ethnic organizations and institutions have also survived from the period of mass immigration and are still in operation, such as Dana College in Blair, Nebraska, the Danish Brotherhood (headquarters in Omaha, Nebraska), and two ethnic newspapers, *Den danske Pioneer* in the Chicago area and *Bien* in California. In addition to such activities surviving from earlier times, the recent ethnic revival has stimulated Danish-Americans of the second and third generations to establish new organizations such as the Danish American Heritage Association (1977) with its journal *The Bridge*, the on-going DIAL project to list all Danish immigrant archival materials at a research center at grand View College in Des Moines, Iowa (originally founded to train Grundtvigian ministers), and the Danish immigrant museum now under development at Elk Horn, Iowa.

Drømmen om Amerika gives good summaries of the development of most aspects of Danish-American ethnicity in so far as they have been studied up to now. The account of Danish-American Lutheranism is particularly good: its late start in 1872, the bitter strife between Inner Mission and Grundtvigian ministers that ended in schism in 1894, and the special problems of the Grundtvigian branch. It remained devoted to preserving Danish ethnicity longer and then lost many of its ministers in the 1920s, when they returned to Denmark as a result of the change-over to English. Helmer Pedersen also records the known evidence to show that Danish participation in immigrant church life was much lower than that of Swedes and especially Norwegians.

Other good summary accounts are about the special Danish-American phenomena of the six folk high schools founded in the United States, none of which survived, and the "Dansk Folkesamfund" founded in 1887 in an attempt to unify all Danes in America in support of their Danish heritage. Of course so ambitious a project was doomed to failure, especially when it soon became embroiled in the church controversy. Information about a branch of this organization that developed in Denmark was new to me.

The weakest part of *Drømmen om Amerika* is the account of Danish-American political life. Thomas P. Christensen's works are not taken into consideration,

nor is there any mention of a number of Danes who were elected to high state office and to the federal Congress. This is related to the main weakness of the book, unavoidable at the present time as Helmer Pedersen is well aware: the lack of specialized studies in Danish-American history on both sides of the Atlantic. This is the reason that *Drømmen om Amerika* gives so much space to the personal accounts of individual immigrants, especially referring to personal letters and memoirs. There are few attempts to evaluate the representativeness of these sources. Here Lovoll's *The Promise of America* is more satisfying as it weaves together individual life stories from the same kind of sources, both to generalize from and to illustrate generalizations.

I also prefer Lovoll's overall organizational plan. He introduces his account of developing ethnic cultural life along with the facts about spreading settlement: the first settlements, then a section on their first churches, schools, and press, before going on to the next period in both aspects. Helmer Pedersen puts all his factual information about immigration and settlement down to 1900 first, then backtracks in time to tell about cultural aspects of group life through the whole half-century. This approach causes specific problems, such as the need to tell about colonies founded by the organization "Dansk Folkesamfund" long before a word of explanation is offered about what this organization was and why it should be trying to establish exclusively Danish colonies as late as after 1887.

Both these historical surveys include chapters on the literature written by their respective immigrant groups in the United States. Lovoll's account is considerably longer and more detailed, but Norwegian-American literature is much larger than Danish and has been studied more. However, neither historian has used this literature as source material. I have noticed only one exception in each book: Lovoll uses Rølvaag's *Giants in the Earth* as an illustration of the historical movement into Dakota territory in the 1870s (p. 83), while Helmer Pedersen seems to have looked into literary as well as historical sources for evidence on specifically Danish farming techniques transplanted to the Midwestern prairie - without finding much concrete evidence in either type of source material (p. 155). As illustrations I am convinced that properly chosen literary examples could serve as well as or better than letters or memoirs and should be used more often.

A great deal of material is available in Danish-American literature, both in book and pamphlet form and in uninvestigated files of magazines and newspapers. These sources often present firsthand accounts by contemporary witnesses; they are no more biased or narrow than letters or memoirs penned by individuals. All personal accounts are interpretative, limited by the personalities, viewpoints, and purposes of those who present them. Literature adds the additional difficulty of artistic form, the genre chosen and the use that the author makes of it. These sources can nevertheless be of great value to social history by helping establish typical (not specific) facts in the general experience of the group as well as picturing, sometimes very vividly, the general milieu in which immigrants lived at different times and places.

Near the end of *Drømmen om Amerika* (p. 302, 305), Helmer Pedersen gives high praise to the last novel by the grand old man of Danish-American history and literature, Enok Mortensen, a first-generation immigrant whose long career as pastor was in the Grundtvigian church: *Den lange plovture* (The long

Furrow), 1984. Written by one who knows from his own experience both the historical and the human reality of long service to an immigrant church, Helmer Pedersen says, this documentary novel is "an important contribution to understanding immigrant experience in the midst of everyday American life." But why this one novel and no others? Similar important contributions exist in many other works of Danish-American literature, including two earlier novels by Mortensen about Danes in Chicago, based on the time he served as a minister in that city: *Saaledes blev jeg hjemløs* (Thus I Became Homeless), 1934, and *Jeg vælger et land* (I Choose a Country), 1936. Helmer Pedersen complains about how little is as yet known about Danes in Chicago and calls for research in the US census records, Danish-American church books, etc.; he seems to be unaware of the full portrait of the Danish community in Chicago in these two novels, including descriptions of all classes from factory owners to unemployed laborers.

Two last complaints should be made. The first is about the illustrations in *Drømmen om Amerika*. These are many and most of them are excellent. A number with long captions add information not contained in the text. A considerable number, however, lack any date, a real difficulty in interpreting photographs historically. Other illustrations seem irrelevant, while some appear misplaced in relation to the text they are supposed to illustrate. Secondly, I find Helmer Pedersen's identification of sources unsatisfactory. In most cases, Helmer Pedersen gives the author of the work he is referring to in the text, often the title, sometimes the date, but never the place or the publisher or the page reference. The bibliographical essay at the end of the book provides little additional information. Lovoll's work also omits footnotes but he gives fellow scholars an overview of sources used: a full bibliography in an appendix, listing alphabetically by name of writer the main articles and books about each topic covered, with full publishing information. The index to *Drømmen om Amerika* is also unsatisfactory, including only the names of people and places.

However, we must remember the very different stages to which Norwegian-American and Danish-American studies have developed at the present time. Lovoll's work rests on a broad base of previous scholarship that reaches back into the last century; in particular the work stimulated by the Norwegian-American Historical Association, founded in 1925, is recognized as among the best produced by any American ethnic group. Helmer Pedersen has had only fragmentary help because in his field so little research has as yet been finished. Given this major handicap, he has done an excellent job of summing up what has been completed and indicating the vast amount of research still awaiting the attention of students and scholars. *Drømmen om Amerika* establishes him as the major authority on Danish-American history today.

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