

entirely convincing, but the reading fits Russell's presentation of a deeply religious woman.

Elise Wærenskjold had a farm in Texas. Her reading connected her to a home country she never saw again after she emigrated. Her writing kept her in touch with friends in the old country and with a Midwestern Norwegian-American literary culture of which she was never a part. In his *The First Chapter of Norwegian Immigration*, published in Madison, Wisconsin, in 1896, a year after Elise died, Rasmus B. Anderson regretted that he "never had the good fortune of meeting Mrs. Wærenskjold," but "his correspondence with her caused me to esteem most highly, this gifted, scholarly, kind, brave and noble woman" (386). Charles H. Russell's biography of her is written in the same spirit. Even if he has placed the object of his study in the context of the history of Texas from the 1840s till after the Civil War, the book is a wonderful example of the bilingual and bilateral research necessary to construct immigrant biographies.

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Johannes B. Wist. *The Rise of Jonas Olsen: A Norwegian Immigrant's Saga*. Translated by Orm Øverland, Foreword by Todd W. Nichol. University of Minnesota Press, 2005. ISBN 0-8166-4750-X.

Johannes B. Wist, a Norwegian immigrant to America, wrote in the years 1919 to 1922 a saga about another immigrant from Norway, a fictional character that he called Jonas Olsen. These stories were written in Norwegian and first published as an installment series in the Norwegian-American newspaper *Decorah-Posten*. It was also published in Norwegian as a trilogy during the period of 1920-1922. *The Rise of Jonas Olsen: A Norwegian Immigrant's Saga*, has now been translated into English by Orm Øverland and published in 2005 by Minnesota Press, in cooperation with The Norwegian-American Historical Association (NAHA) and editor Todd W. Nichol.

The publication is important because it demonstrates the ceaseless search for the great immigration novel. Johannes Wist's immigrant story exceeds the boundaries of time and offers a unique insight into the processes immigrants went through upon their arrival in America in the years before and after 1900.

Johannes B. Wist lived between 1864 and 1923. He emigrated to America in 1884 and worked as editor of the *Decorah-Posten* for many years. In *The Western Home: A Literary History of Norwegian America* (1996), a work on the Norwegian culture and literature in America, professor Øverland portrays Johannes B. Wist as a "bemused spectator," a talented author, and a gifted satirist. Moreover, Øverland argues that the trilogy about Jonas Olsen is "one of the most interesting and entertaining literary products of *Vesterheimen*."

The theme of *The Rise of Jonas Olsen* – not an accidental title – contains three different storylines. Book I, entitled, *Scenes from the Life of a Newcomer: Jonas Olsen's First Years in America*, captures – according to Solveig Zempel's characterization in an essay from 1986 – "the urban Norwegian-American milieu of the 1880s in a por-

trayal that is once both realistic and satirical.” Zempel points to “the fact that many of the minor characters were real people with names that would have been familiar to any contemporary reader must have added greatly to the humor.”

Book II, *The Home on the Prairie: Jonas Olsen's First Year in the Settlement*, takes the reader away from the big city to the prairies of the Midwest and traditional farmer life, a life that awaited most Norwegian immigrants coming to America. The plot in the novel evolves around the ambitious, but not particularly smart Jonas Olsen, who soon gets involved in numerous affairs from conjugal jealousy to regional power struggles on his rocky road to status and wealth. But the story is also a fascinating portrait of a frontier community in the making and gives the reader vivid examples of the cultural, religious, ethnic, social, economic, and political aspects of pioneer life.

Book III describes Jonas, his wife Ragna, and their daughter Signe Marie's move to the small town of Johnsville, a prairie town founded as a whistle stop town among the many towns which popped up during the expansion of the railway. The new Country Town is soon to be referred to as Jonasville by its inhabitants after their leading figure, Jonas Olsen, who attempts to turn Johnsville into a county seat with its own court house, to the detriment of the small town, Normanville. The author must have based this story on what Odd S. Lovoll defines as “a County Seat War,” in his book, *Norwegians on the Prairie: Ethnicity and the Development of the Country Town* (2006). In his book Lovoll describes the raiding and the physical relocation of the court house in Lac qui Parle County in November 1886.

Apparently Wist knew how to balance criticism of and loyalty to a group of people to whom he himself belonged and evidently loved, as well as avoiding propagandist and sentimental undertones in his writings. His choice of language, which is that of the Norwegian-American dialect, adds another touch of realism to the characters in the novel.

The humor is imbedded in the author's use of linguistic effects to show how immigrants try to tackle the challenges of mastering the American language and having to let go of their Norwegian native language. Orm Øverland includes comments on the translation and shows that it was a conscious aim to let enough of Wist's Norwegian-American language shine through. In this way he has managed to overcome a challenge Solveig Zempel described in her thesis from 1980: *Language Use in the Novels of Johannes B. Wist: A Study of Bilingualism in Literature*.

Wist did not provide his trilogy with a title. *The Rise of Jonas Olsen* is a title coined by the translator. By choosing this title, Øverland possibly wants the reader to relate the story to the classic novel of American immigration literature, *The Rise of David Levinsky*, by Abraham Cahan (1917), whose title was again inspired by William Dean Howells's *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885). The common theme of these books, including the one about Jonas Olsen, is their ironic portraits of the rise, but also the moral dilemmas and involuntary corruption of the hero of the story.

The trilogy about Jonas Olsen is not only a story about a more or less successful immigrant. In sharp contrast to his businesslike manner defined by the motto, “bisnis is bisnis, ju'no,” draped in the Norwegian-American dialect, stands Ragna, his wife, with a firm, unyielding personality. The gender perspective is thus clearly highlighted with a sharp polarity between the masculine American immigration communities

with that of the feminine values. Obviously neither Ragna nor other women were completely without resources as members of the immigrant community, and the character of Mrs O'Brian underlines this clearly by her increasingly powerful position in local politics. Wist has attempted to show how men in many ways were dependent on women, exemplified by the marriage of Jonas Olsen's daughter Signe Marie to the son of a man with whom her father had bitter fights.

The social and cultural context of the book is its strongest asset. The immigrant lifestyle is vividly presented and the portrayal towards the end of the book of the small town Johnsville makes *The Rise of Jonas Olsen* an interesting supplement to the satirical presentation of the American small town in the tradition of Sinclair Lewis in the 1920s, as well as the sociological classics like W. Lloyd Warner's *Democracy in Jonesville: A Study in Quality and Inequality* (1949) and Odd S. Lovoll's latest work on the Norwegian-American small towns.

*The Rise of Jonas Olsen* is a vibrant and instructive story of Americanization from the years when Norwegian emigration peaked to the period of the legislative endeavors to restrict and curb immigrant cultures. Furthermore, the book gives the reader an excellent picture of how American society functioned locally, regionally, and federally during this era. And behind Wist the author we can catch a glimpse of Wist the editor and his views on the institutional importance of the Norwegian-American paper. It was after all the paper's readers to whom he wrote the stories now published with the title, *The Rise of Jonas Olsen*.

By translating Johannes B. Wist's book into English, Orm Øverland has greatly enriched the study of American immigration history, culture, and literature from a Scandinavian perspective. And he has given an American and an international audience an added opportunity to explore and understand the situation of the immigrants, their ethnic communities and, implicitly, to understand the story of America itself.

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