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Linda G. Donelson

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# Karen Blixen: The Quintessential Dane

by Linda G. Donelson

The year 2005 marks the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of Hans Christian Andersen and the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of Søren Kierkegaard. It also is the 120<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Karen Blixen's birth in 1885, and it is appropriate to talk about her at this conference. For the millions of Americans who have seen the movie *Out of Africa*, she may be the most famous Dane of all. We often imagine Karen Blixen as personified by Meryl Streep in the movie. But if you have read the book *Out of Africa*, you may rather think of Karen Blixen simply as a Danish settler in Kenya in the turn of the 1900s. She also is well remembered as the celebrated author who visited New York City in 1959, where she caused a stir as such a frail yet vigorous storyteller.

Many portraits depict her in later years, when she was wrinkled and emaciated, dying not from anorexia or from syphilis, as some have claimed, but from complications of surgery for an ulcer. The last photos of her obscure her vibrant personality as a younger woman. In a certain way, those who die young have an advantage, because we remember them at their best. Princess Diana, for example, will be remembered at her most gorgeous. I think Karen Blixen would prefer us to remember her at age 43 in Kenya in 1928—the happiest year of her life—when Denys Finch Hatton was living with her, the Prince of Wales was soon to arrive, and the bushbuck Lulu was showing off



*Elderly Karen Blixen. Denmark, 1957. (Photo by Hugo Hellsten)*



Young Karen Blixen. Kenya, 1928.  
(Photographer unknown)

fawns on her lawn. In her most appealing photo, Karen Blixen sits outside on the steps wearing a checked cotton sundress with a fashionable Somali shawl. She is radiant with good health.

Because Karen Blixen wrote in English, it has been easy to ignore the fact that she was a Dane. No scholarly papers, even in Denmark, have examined Karen Blixen's stories to see how her writing was influenced by her Danish upbringing.

It is said that Scandinavians bear three important characteristics: you are fiercely principled, you are loyal to your families to an extraordinary degree, and you

are nostalgic for home no matter where you are. Your principles are fabled in stories of the ancient Vikings. Your family loyalty has been noted by historians for 2,000 years. And your sexual freedoms are admired around the world.

The literary historian Bertha Philpotts makes an interesting observation about the people of the north. She studied the great migrations, which began around 400 A.D., when many so-called Germanic tribes moved south into Italy, west into the British Isles, and as far east as Turkey. Historians have placed the original homes of several of these tribes in Scandinavia. The Ostrogoths toppled the Roman Empire and the Anglo-Saxons changed the course of history in Britain. The great Anglo-Saxon saga *Beowulf* is built upon the genealogy of Danes and events in Denmark. This era could be compared to a similar epoch when settlers came to the United States or when Danish settlers, among others, invaded places such as Kenya, the Virgin Islands, and Greenland. The earlier migrations, including those of the Angles and the Jutes from Denmark to

England, are often referred to as the invasions of the *barbarians*. Philpotts has some pithy things to say about the northern character:

Few peoples have had as spectacular successes as those who took part in the national migrations. They swept across Europe: they founded kingdoms from the Black Sea to Spain, from Africa to England. Yet what their poets remember is always connected with failure, defeat, disaster. They have utterly forgotten Alaric and the sack of Rome, but Gunnar, who was defeated by the Huns not much later, is remembered for eight centuries or more, and sung of from Austria to Greenland. So too with Ermanaric under who the Gothic people were subdued by the Huns. The Anglo-Saxons have left us no word in poetry of the victories they gained over the Britons, but they still remember the defeat and death of Hygelac in Friesland.<sup>1</sup>

This quote brings to mind a much later literary masterpiece that concerns a similar theme, namely, Karen Blixen's *Out of Africa*, a great work of literature that deals with a series of failures, defeats, and disasters: the loss of her farm in East Africa after fire, drought and multiple fatal accidents; the death of her great friend Denys Finch Hatton; and the defeat of her aspirations to be a deliverer to her African workers. Scandinavians know how to create great art from defeat. Kierkegaard failed to develop his love for the famous young Regine, failed to communicate with his father, failed to become a cleric as his family wanted him to be. He turned these defeats into great writing and works of literature that will last through the ages. Hans Christian Andersen, a boy from an impoverished home, whose parents bequeathed him little physical attractiveness, conjured his inadequacies into great art and a reputation that will last forever.

From the beginning, Karen Blixen, like Kierkegaard and Andersen, was forced to overcome personal defeats. She was not homely, but not particularly beautiful. Her father had committed suicide when she was ten years old, and her mother was left with a farm but few other resources. The Dinesens lived in the countryside and were never part of society. It was difficult to succeed in Denmark without connections, and women were at a disadvantage

because society did not think it necessary for a woman to have a profession. The young Karen Dinesen received the greater part of her education at home from the women of her family. She spent her adolescence languishing over her love for a distant relative, Hans Blixen. He was a talented rider, who would win a medal for horsemanship in the Olympics of 1912. But he married someone else.

Eventually Karen Dinesen coped with this defeat by doing the same thing your ancestors did, by emigrating. In her case, she married Hans Blixen's twin brother, Bror, and emigrated to East Africa to start a coffee farm. But unlike your ancestors, Karen Blixen eventually went back to Denmark, when the Depression came and coffee prices defeated her efforts to farm in Kenya. In her letters, she talked from time to time of continuing her writing in Africa, of opening a restaurant, of marrying someone else, earning a different living or finding a new partner, as other settlers did. Her final decision to return to Denmark is fascinating. Look into your own Danish hearts, and see if you understand why Karen Blixen would leave Kenya, a place of gorgeous beauty, with plains filled with magnificent game; with fascinating people like the Masai, the Ndorobo, and the Kikuyu; with an inspiring climate never graduating to extremes of cold or heat; with mountains on the horizon, trout in the streams, and friends and the comforts of a colonial power. Why did Karen Blixen leave all this to return to Denmark, to return to her mother's bosom, to return to the very house and farm where she would die as she had been born?

The Nordic scholar Kevin Crossley-Holland, in his wonderful book *The Norse Myths*, talks about the essential characteristics of the ancient Vikings. He says they were, above all, loyal to family. They were brave, so brave that they would rush into battle naked to scare the enemy, which gives us the wonderful word "berserk." But the Vikings possessed one surprising vulnerability: they were always homesick. In *Njal's Saga*, Gunnar is banished on pain of death not to return to Iceland. What happens? He is about to leave, but his horse stumbles and Gunnar has an opportunity to look back at his farm. And he is struck by such love for his homeland that it is impossible



*The Wilhelm Dinesen cabin at Mole Lake, Wisconsin.*

*(Photo by Steve A. Woods, 2001)*

for him to leave. He turns his horse around and he declares, "I will ride home and *never* leave it!" And so he seals his doom.

Karen Blixen's return to Denmark from Africa hardly sealed her doom; it opened an entirely new future for her. But it resembled to a striking extent the behavior of her father in the previous generation. He, too, had tried to emigrate. He settled in the United States in a cabin in Wisconsin. You can still see that cabin today at Mole Lake, near Rhinelander. Wilhelm Dinesen's homestead "stake" today lies within a Native American reserve. On old plat maps of Wisconsin, it is listed as *Frydenlund* (Land of Joy). But Wilhelm Dinesen lasted only eighteen months in America. When the lure of his homeland proved too great, he went back to Denmark.

Karen Blixen could have been writing about her father or herself when, in a story called *Sorgagre* (Sorrow-acre), she talks about the character, Adam: "He was back in Denmark, no longer a child...with tales of other countries to tell, and still a true son of his own land, and enchanted by its loveliness as he had never been before." Karen Blixen had lived in Africa for sixteen years when she wrote to her mother in the midst of a quarrel with Denys Finch Hatton, "I find myself longing for Denmark, with dew on the grass, cowslips, and waves from the Sound, in a way that sends me completely wild."<sup>2</sup>

At the beginning of her trip to Africa in 1913, the young Karen Dinesen hated saying goodbye to her mother and sister, who had gone with her all the way to the boat dock in Naples. She was



twenty-eight years old and had never been away from home for a lengthy time and had never traveled without another member of her family. Concerning the northern tribes, the Roman historian Tacitus says:

Cloistered circumstances strengthen the importance of the family unit...a man is bound to take up the feuds as well as the friendships of father or kinsmen... This is much to the advantage of the community.<sup>3</sup>

Throughout her seventeen years in Africa, Karen Blixen was never far from ties that bound her to her family. Her angel and nemesis was her uncle, Aage Westenholz, her mother's brother and chairman of the family corporation that owned her coffee farm. He was a crusty figure, with a dry typically Scandinavian wit. He traveled to Africa in 1921 at the age of 62 to inspect his investment. Excerpts from his letters can make you laugh out loud. In relation to how to pay off the debts on the farm, he says, "Bror, of course, made some very helpful suggestions; it is frightening to think what he can come up with."<sup>4</sup> Concerning the society of the medieval Vikings, it is said that, even in ancient times, one special relationship existed within the family: a maternal uncle was especially responsible for the welfare of his nephew,<sup>5</sup> or, in this case, his niece. Karen Blixen was dependent on Uncle Aage for her monthly allowances, and also for his affection when all else failed her. Scandinavians take family loyalty for granted, and they may run into conflict with those who have little sense of its importance.

In the film *Out of Africa*, toward the end, Karen Blixen has a falling out with Denys Finch Hatton. Of course in real life circumstances did not happen as in the movie. But there really was a falling out between them, and all evidence suggests that it was for this reason: Denys Finch Hatton, an Englishman, saw the world differently than the very Danish Karen Blixen. The problem was his understanding of loyalty, which was not the same as hers. The falling out began in 1928, three years before Karen Blixen left Kenya for good. The quarrel was not about jealousy, as claimed in the Hollywood version. Nor did Denys Finch Hatton have an affair with Beryl Markham, as some have assumed. Such claims do not come from Beryl Markham, but from those who never met Denys

Finch Hatton. Markham, author of the admired memoir about Kenya, *West with the Night*, told the biographer Mary Lovell that Denys was homosexual.<sup>6</sup> His greatest friend was Berkeley Cole, who, according to his relatives in England, was also homosexual. When Denys died at the age of forty-four, he had never been linked with any woman other than Karen Blixen. His ashes were delivered to her for burial.

The rift between Denys Finch Hatton and Karen Blixen concerned two visits to Kenya of the Prince of Wales, the later Duke of Windsor. In *Shadows on the Grass*, Karen Blixen describes the sumptuous meal and gala evening of African dances the Prince attended at her farm in 1928. She says, "I felt that this was an opportunity of bringing the cause of the Natives, in the matter of their taxation, before the Prince." Unfortunately, the Prince's travels in Kenya eventually led to a shattering quarrel between her and Denys.

"Denys is in absolute despair, because he has been asked to take the Prince of Wales, who is coming out here in October, on safari," Karen Blixen wrote to her mother. "I laughed at him for taking it so hard, but he says that I don't know what English royalties are like, or the '*fuss*' that is made about them."<sup>7</sup> Denys's experience as a commercial safari guide, his reputation as one of the best white hunters in East Africa, and his friendship with the royal family had placed him in an embarrassing position. He hated ceremony, and he knew the trip would involve an entire entourage, not just the Prince's staff, but also a crowd of prominent colonials, who would want to go along as hosts. He finally agreed to lead the hunt, but he was forced to look around for help. He had known Bror Blixen for several years and was confident that Bror would make a good second guide. Bror himself was running an influential safari business. However, Finch Hatton's invitation to Bror to help him with the safari dismissed the fact that Bror had divorced Karen Blixen only a few years earlier. The divorce meant that she could not go along on the hunt. A new, and different, Baroness Blixen would go along.

It is clear that Denys's plan presented a conflict of friendship, one might even say, of mythic proportions: Finch Hatton, who had been



sharing Karen Blixen's home, had proffered an invitation to her divorced husband whom she regarded as an enemy. By consorting with Bror, Finch Hatton had broken the tenets of loyalty so important in the Norse tradition. In Viking times, a person stood by his family to the death. A friend would gladly kill his friend's enemy and would be dishonored if he consorted with him. Finch Hatton's invitation to Bror was a betrayal to an ideal that Karen Blixen took for granted. She could not understand Denys's casual view of friendship; his siding with Bror was intolerable to her. He had become a traitor. She was very angry and told him so, and wrote to her mother that she made a terrible scene.<sup>8</sup>

Denys Finch Hatton was not sympathetic to Karen Blixen's censorship of his decision. He was the favorite of his family, and he was not used to criticism, let alone anger. In his English family, anger was not quite an acceptable emotion. Karen Blixen had been divorced from Bror for four years and, from his viewpoint, she should have by this time dismissed Bror from her mind. Denys could not be diverted from regarding the safari for the Prince of Wales in a practical way. The hunt went ahead as planned, and Bror Blixen was invited on a second safari with Finch Hatton and the Prince of Wales two years later. These actions by Denys created a breach between him and Karen Blixen that, one can see from her letters, never healed. From this time, though they continued their friendship, she talks of him in a more distant way, at one point characterizing him as heartless.<sup>9</sup> He continues to disappoint her, failing to come through on a promised loan of money, joining forces with Bror a second time with the Prince of Wales, and, as she notes in *Out of Africa*, showing little sympathy for her loss of the farm and her plans to return to Denmark. At the very last, he takes back the ring that he had given her. And there are unusual gaps in her published letters, suggesting that some of her comments about Denys have been left out, hidden or erased.

Her response to the quarrel, however, showed just how Scandinavian Karen Blixen was. Repeatedly in her writings, she points out that laughter has to be one's ultimate reaction to fate. In the Norse myths, one finds—time and again—that humor solves the most fateful and dreaded circumstances. Do you remember, in Norse

mythology, when Thor's battleaxe is stolen by a mean bully of a giant named Thrym? It is essential for Thor to get back the magical weapon. Eventually, Loke and the other gods devise an elaborate plan to dress up the burly, bearded Thor as a bride and get him to seduce the giant. And this elaborate practical joke succeeds.

Karen Blixen refers to fate as the famous "ha-ha" of the universe. She chose her pen name, Isak Dinesen, because Isak means in Hebrew: the one who laughs. You remember that the naked Viking Berserks would rush into battle with maniacal laughter, the so-called *ridens moriar* in Latin, or laughter at death. So, Karen Blixen says in a letter to her mother, even after she has been so angry with Denys Finch Hatton, she ends up laughing.<sup>10</sup> One might say that even Denys's death and her loss of the farm gave her the last laugh, because she created great literature from these terrible events.

Humor is an aspect of Karen Blixen's works that few have written about. I hope you will read her stories again and notice how frequently she uses humorous irony. Both of her famous countrymen, Kierkegaard and Andersen, make plentiful use of wit in their stories, and, I believe, you will find that the greatest literature survives because of its humor.

I think of Danes as people who, no matter how serious the circumstances, can still come up with a joke. If you read, or see the film of Karen Blixen's story, *Babette's Feast*, you will see how, by means of humor, she turns the sour outlook on life of a congregation of Christian pietists into a great feast of celebration. The dour church-goers agree to eat Babette's fabulous food, out of politeness, but they make a secret pact not to really enjoy anything on the table. Of course, the joke plays out that they become a little tipsy and, once they have loosened up, have a wonderful meal. Danes are not the only ones to use humor in their literature, but it seems particularly Danish to me that Danes are able to endure very tragic events, such as the ones in *Out of Africa*, and still find some ironic good in them.

A recent film documentary, *Karen Blixen: Out of this World*, shows how she continued laughing even in death. And it also shows the profound importance of family loyalty unto the end. Her nephew Tore Dinesen relates an anecdote about her funeral. Karen Blixen had requested to be buried beside the grave of her dog Pasop,

because the funeral pyres of great Viking chieftains always included their favorite dog. But the minister insisted that such a burial would be sacrilegious and not permissible. Tore Dinesen says, "A few days after the funeral my father [Thomas Dinesen] said to me, 'Come. We have a little digging to do.' And so we went back to the old spreading beech tree and reunited her with her beloved Pasop."<sup>11</sup>

An overview of Karen Blixen's life shows that her greatest decisions were made according to her Scandinavian ideals. She clung tenaciously to family loyalty and to an almost inbred love for her Danish homeland. Her writing style was influenced by her northern view that life is a series of defeats that can be knit together to make a story. It can be argued that her Scandinavian laughter gives her writing its greatness. She subscribed to the age-old belief of the northern peoples that you must make your reputation on earth in order to achieve immortality. *Havamal* (the bible of the pagan Scandinavian cosmos) says:

Cattle die, kinsmen die,  
I myself shall die,  
but there is one thing I know never dies:  
the reputation we leave behind at our death.

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<sup>1</sup> Davis, Craig R. *Beowulf and the Demise of Germanic Legend in England*. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc, 1996, p. xiii

<sup>2</sup> Dinesen, Isak, *Letters from Africa, 1914-1931*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981, p. 407

<sup>3</sup> Crossley-Holland, Kevin. *The Norse Myths*. New York, Pantheon Books, 1980, p. xviii

<sup>4</sup> Westenholz, Anders. *The Power of Aries: Myth and Reality in Karen Blixen's Life*. Trans. Lise Kure-Jensen. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987, p. 16

<sup>5</sup> Crossley-Holland, p. xviii

<sup>6</sup> Lovell, Mary. *Straight on Till Morning*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987, p. 365

<sup>7</sup> Dinesen, Isak. *Letters from Africa*, p. 361

<sup>8</sup> *Letters from Africa*, p. 407

<sup>9</sup> *Letters from Africa*, p. 413

<sup>10</sup> *Letters from Africa*, p. 407

<sup>11</sup> *Karen Blixen: Out of this World*. Film directed by Marcus Mandal and Anna von Lowzow, 2005