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Of Two Women in Scandinavian-American Immigrant Literature

by Mikael Engelstoft Hansen

Neither politics nor traditional history has ever spelled much interest to me. But then I read in Hilde Petra Brungot’s dissertation on Dorthea Dahl (1881-1958) of this Lutheran Norwegian-American immigrant writer being an outspoken Republican.

Dorthea Dahl was born in Norway, but moved with her parents to South Dakota at the age of two. Her health was frail, so in 1903 the family moved to Idaho, where Dahl lived most of her life, working as a bookkeeper. The inspiration of her writing, often printed in church publications and written in the evening hours, with the lamp at home burning late at her tidy desk no doubt, comes from personal experiences within her family and the mostly immigrant local community.

The stories of her *Fra hverdagslivet* [From Everyday Life] and *Returning Home* as well as her only novel *Byen paa berget* [The City on the Hill] tell of a place where times were simpler. Once reading *Kjærlighetsbudet* [The Commandment of Love], on the challenges one may face trying to write a book or *The Choir in Hancock*, on how a town is not the same without a choir, a quiet happiness sets in.

From her stories, I could identify with Dorthea Dahl’s everyday life and later read Brungot stating that:

Defining the "true America" as the land of opportunity and individual enterprise, Dorthea at the same time revealed little understanding for the problems of industrialization. Her political opinion remained consistent despite the rapid development that transformed America into an urbanized society during her lifetime.3

I am not sure this side of Dorthea Dahl can be dismissed so easily. Mankind has a way of moving too swiftly at times, and science often creates more problems than it solves. Dahl, engaged in congregations and ladies’ aid societies, never found the time to come around and have writing be her primary line of work, at times to the
point of defiance; she may well simply have opposed the tremendous speed at which the industrial explosion of the melting pot moved along, and land did indeed become sparse in little time.

Ole Edvart Rølvaag (1876–1931) and Sophus Keith Winther (1893-1983) were only a generation apart. But while there was plenty of land in the former’s *Giants in the Earth*, the latter’s *Take All to Nebraska* is about rent farmers on the wide-open and at times merciless prairie of the southeastern part of this state. The men were explorers, while the women longed for the old country. And perhaps, with the later migration to the cities on the rise, their children were less conservative, at least more modern, than their immigrant parents; Winther certainly was.

Spirits were not high. The nation was in the depths of its worst depression following the stock market crash in 1929. Norwegian-American Dorthea Dahl on the other hand did not like the Democratic Roosevelt. He and Truman, she thought, "put an end to the true America." Dahl, to name two things, was for prohibition and condemned the lust for money, the corruption of new world materialism.

The Norwegian Rølvaag wrote in his *Concerning Our Heritage* from 1922:

> But the strongest principle hastening the "transition" is the law of inertia itself. It is our spiritual laziness and apathy, the spiritual poverty amongst us. We are too intellectually lazy to remain a bilingual people. We don't even want to. It is so much easier - superficially at least - to have only one language to deal with.

The Danish Enok Mortensen (1902-1984) likewise had a character say the following in his *Jeg vælger et Land* [I Choose a Country] from 1936: "Good sandwiches and a cold mug in the shade of a beech tree—that's their dream of Denmark!" Was this, so soon after the turbulent mass emigration, once again already true for the Danish men? And what about the women that stood by their husbands? I looked for a female Danish-American author and found only one. Her name is Christiane Petersen; she lived about when Dahl did, and she wrote *Adelheid og Bazaren i Beatrice* [Adelheid and the Bazaar in Beatrice], which was published in 1912 in Blair, Nebraska. The
seventy pages of her book intertwine several storylines. One is about Pastor Holmstrup and his wife, whose congregation shares a church with nearby residents of a small town in the American Midwest. There is a large Catholic church and others as well, but no Danish church. Another storyline includes Mrs. Dahl (not Dorthea!), who is a Danish descendent of a German nobility family and moved to Beatrice sixteen years ago, later to become the mother of four daughters while earning a living being a private music teacher and providing lodging in her house for renters.

A third storyline presents Mathias Lund, the factory owner, who emigrated to America at an early age and had worked hard all his life. He has lost his relatives, but keeps on collecting money. Yet another storyline features Mrs. Dahl's youngest daughter, Adelheid, who is awkward, cannot sew and is a loner who likes to read and write, which she does well.

With these four storylines in place, the table is set and the plot takes off as the sudden excitement of a group of Danish youngsters focuses on the need for a Danish church. One is here reminded of Mrs. Holmstrup's early anticipation of good times to come and senses a happy ending in sight when the Danish community gathers around the practical affairs of the bazaar, whose purpose is to raise money for the church and of which Mrs. Dahl is left in charge.

Meanwhile, Adelheid is busy elsewhere. She overcomes the fearful side of the image of God that her mother has been hammering into her throughout her childhood. The conversion is an essential pietistic ingredient. Religiously better suited within, she moves ahead and provides a contribution that makes a difference to the church and to the pastor. She is no longer the ugly duckling, to the congregation or to her family.

I shall reveal no more than Adelheid and the Bazaar in Beatrice redeems a promise of this happy ending. In this tradition perhaps, or for non-festive religious reasons, Christiane Petersen steered clear of politics and did not use the Danish Constitution Day although Danish flags are present, unlike Dorthea Dahl in her The Seventeenth of May, first published in 1921 and whose "language question", and not just that, divides the congregation. Dahl, however, cleverly and with a good sense of humor finds the way to a happy ending.
Christiane Petersen was a Holy Dane, a pietist, an Inner Missioner, which Jacquelynn Sorensen points out in the last chapter on "The Effect of Grundtvigian and Inner Mission Philosophies on Danish-American Literature" of her dissertation entitled *Kierkegaard, Grundtvig, and Danish Literature on The Plains*. The focus is not the community, but personal rescue.

I would like to mention another female author, whose background is pietism too and whose last name is even Sorensen. Her first name is Virginia (1912-1991), she grew up in the Idaho that Dorthea Dahl knew well after moving there from the Midwest, and while the Danish descent is apparent in some of her books, this Mormon novelist is not viewed as an immigrant writer, in part because she was just born when Christiane Petersen's story was published. In short, I know of no female immigrant author among the Happy Danes of long ago, although women are certainly present in Grundtvigian immigrant novels.

It is at times like this when I wish I could step inside a time machine and by the mere push of a button go back to Beatrice, wander the hills and get a feel for the everyday life in the Danish corner of this town. In Jean and Edith Matteson's *Blossoms of the Prairie*, Beatrice is mentioned in conjunction with a few Danish priests, none of whom I know anything about. Looking into the history of Beatrice, I see that it was founded in 1857 by a group of pioneers from St. Louis, traveling by a steamer up the Missouri River to the new territory of Nebraska.

There had to be more to it. And maybe there is. In Thorvald Hansen's *Danish Immigrant Archival Listing*, there are two titles listed by a Christiane Petersen. The first we know. The second is *Frelst ved en Salme [Saved by Way of a Hymn]*, a book of 96 pages published by *Danskeren* in 1895. *Danskeren* [The Dane], a weekly newspaper edited from a Christian point of view, began its publication in 1892 and moved from Neenah, Wisconsin to Blair, Nebraska by the end of the decade. In 1921, *Danskeren* and *Dansk Luthersk Kirkeblad* merged to form *Luthersk Ugeblad*.

I read Christiane Petersen's *Frelst ved en Salme* in issues 4 through 16 of the 1894 volume of *Danskeren*. The thirteen parts of the ongoing story published in the paper are not chapters, but fairly
even portions, on average close to two columns, set aside in Danskeren's section on page three entitled De Unges Afdeling. [For the Youngsters]. Kristiane Pedersen, as her name is spelled there, is indeed young. A recurring advertisement, which soon afterwards praises her book, refers to her as a young woman who arrived in America when she was only one year of age.¹⁸

The story begins as Mrs. Johnson, Bessie's mother, gets on her buggy to visit a sick friend five miles away for the night. She is worried about her daughter spending the time alone in the house. What if thieves come along? She has seen someone lurking around, and there are 300 dollars in savings in the house. Do not forget to lock the door and roll down the curtains, the mother exhorts. And after she has left following a goodbye kiss, Bessie at home quickly feels less confident than she had appeared before.

Mr. Johnson is a Danish-American immigrant, who came with his family to the new country when he was twelve, while Mrs. Johnson was born an American. She, like the mother in Adelheid og Bazaren i Beatrice, is a widow. Her husband died four years earlier following a work accident at a quarry, and her modest income has since come from the rent of a farm being leased out. She and Bessie much enjoy life in their small house including a beautiful garden with grass, flowers, and a water fountain. There are valley mountains to the north and south, while the Delaware river runs to the east and church towers and the Pennsylvania capital of Harrisburg can be seen in the west.

There once were four siblings, with Bessie being the only sister. While the parents were away attending a wedding sixteen years earlier, the oldest son was kidnapped at the age of four by a drunken Irishman, who could not keep his job at the Johnson farm. The two youngest children died when they were infants. In the presence of the lonely night, Bessie cannot seem to spend more than minutes on any given task. She likes to read books by authors such as Charles Dickens and to play the piano, and she attends to the hens and the cows as well as their dog named Pasop. She also reads Danish fluently.

The mother returns the next day, but sets out for a similar trip two months later, at which time she receives a surprise letter in the mail.
It is a major setback just when things are going well. Six years earlier, the Johnson father served at the guarantor of a loan of a friend, who later dies, the new owner eventually runs away with the money leaving his debt behind, now haunting the living Johnson family, who two months later loses both the farm and the house. They start from scratch, renting a small house with the help of a neighborhood family while working at sewing clothes and teaching the piano.

The following summer, a typhoid epidemic passes through the area and the mother dies, leaving Bessie alone in the world, with which she is unfamiliar. This setting, which undeniably calls for the pietistic faith, concludes the first three of the thirteen part series in Danskeren's volume of 1894. But having been saved by believing has already taken place. We just do not know it yet and must, along with Bessie, return to her uncle's Denmark, a trip so real and so rich in detail that the reader may forget that it could also, given the author's young age, have been spun of her imagination, inspired by stories of her father's childhood Denmark.

The deliverance is twofold united in one. Mr. Clementson, a relative to the Danish Johansen family, but now living in England, was once the young man lurking outside the Johnson house. What deterred him from stealing their savings was also what comforted Bessie in her night of loneliness. The song that she was playing on the piano was *Jesus Han er Synderes Ven [Jesus He is a Friend of Sinners]*, which Mr. Clementson's mother also once played when he was a child.

Returning to the young Adelheid's conversion in Beatrice, her contribution was the story that she wrote. Is it likely that the two Christiane Petersens are one and the same? It is certainly possible, given the similarities in space and time. Could it be that the 1894 story just outside of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania forms somewhat of a backdrop to the 1912 novel taking place in the corner community of Beatrice, Nebraska?

Could it be that the former is the latter's main character's prize-winning story, that Christiane Petersen is the daughter in both books while at the same time the author has reached the age of the mother at the time of writing the latter? If Christiane Petersen were a mere
few years older than seventeen in 1894, then she was born around 1875 just slightly older than Dorthea Dahl, born in 1881. Sewing, embroidery and piano teaching are essential in both works, whose authors bear the same name. Still, the difference of eighteen years between 1894 and 1912 is less than the age of the oldest daughter in Adelheid; she was six when the family moved to Beatrice sixteen years earlier than the book’s present time. Given this, the early immigrant background of Mrs. Dahl is also not that of Mrs. Johnson; it is my guess that the former’s is simply less autobiographical than that of the latter. Nor is Adelheid identical to Bessie; in both cases are there four siblings, but Adelheid’s are all girls and all alive. Perhaps the story in Beatrice is an idealized Danish-American community version of how life would have been, if not for the hardship and lack of fellow countrymen outside of Harrisburg. Their conservative and religious immigrant backgrounds of the two women, Christiane Petersen and Dorthea Dahl, are in many ways similar. Their stories of congregational life present two women’s perspective on the church, but they may never have heard of each other, given Dahl’s culturally isolated Idaho and Petersen’s quiet, pietistic Nebraska community. It is apparent that Danish women emigrating to America did not publish much literature.

A hundred years ago, Danish women, given their country’s growing city life, may well have been less conservative and more progressive than their Scandinavian counterparts, which explains why they devoted their efforts to reality rather than fiction. As for those who emigrated to America, there were relatively few Danish women, due to the shift in the late nineteenth century from families to individuals heading for America. In general, there were fewer Danes than Norwegians and Swedes too, and comparatively we left towns rather than rural areas. We even assimilated more easily and became more scattered, to which our relative carefree letting go of both religion and language testifies.

I am simply glad I have come to know a little of Christiane Petersen. For now, rare copies of her first book reside at Dana College, while a copy of her later book of life in a Nebraska immigrant community can be found at the nearby Grand View
College library, and that may very well be the only place anywhere at this time.

3 Hilde Petra Brungot, Dorthea Dahl, p. 35.
7 If the era of the immigrant literature is extended up to the middle of the twentieth century, the number of female Norwegian-American and Swedish-American authors becomes significant. The former offers Kathryn Forbes (1908-1966), Borghild Dahl, Margarethe Erdahl Shank, Agnes Roisdal and Lillian M. Gamble, while Anna Olsson, Lillian Budd and Skulda V. Baner belong to the latter.
8 Christiane Petersen, Adelheid og Bazaren i Beatrice [Adelheid and the Bazaar in Beatrice] (Blair, Nebraska: Danish Lutheran Publ. House, 1912). I thank the Grand View College Archivist Sheri Kleinwort, who made it possible for me to read the book.
9 One of several contributions by various Norwegian authors in Sturdy Folks and Other Stories (Minneapolis: K.C. Holter Publishing Company, 192?); the book does not list the year of publication.
10 Jacquelynn Sorensen, Kierkegaard, Grundtvig, and Danish Literature on the Plains (University of Nebraska at Lincoln: Ph.D., 1984).
12 Jean M. Matteson and Edith M. Matteson, Blossoms of the Prairie: the history of the Danish Lutheran churches in Nebraska (Lincoln, Nebraska: Blossoms of the Prairie, 1988).
14 Ibid., 3209 Petersen, Christiane, Adelheid og Bazaren i Beatrice. Blair, NE DLPH, 1912, 70 pages. Fiction. IA01, NE01. and 3210 Petersen, Christiane, Frelst ved en Salme. Neenah, WI Danskeren, 1985, 96 pages. Note: this is another spelling of the same author as in 3160 [3166]. NE01.; 3166 Pedersen, Kristiane, Frelst ved en Salme. Neenah, WI Danskeren, 1894. Note: this is another spelling for the same author as in 3120. DEN1. Thorvald Hansen on the other hand does not mention whether 3209 and 3210 are written by the same person; he does however include the following interesting entry. 3629 Sorensen, Virginia, House Next Door, The. New York, NY, 1954. Subject unknown. DEN1.
15 Author’s translation.
16 Thorvald Hansen, op.cit., entry 3120 indicates 1895 being the year of publication. The ad for the book mentioned in a later note started in Danskeren already by the end of 1894 however, No. 47, p. 3 – and kept running until at least 1895, No. 17, p. 3, including No. 1, p. 3, No. 2, p. 3, No. 4, p. 3, No. 14, p. 3, No. 15, p. 6, No. 16, p. 6.
18 Christiane Petersen was one year old at the time of her emigration, while Dorthea Dahl was two when she arrived in America. Another striking similarity is that Dahl was unmarried, while Christiane Petersen’s books feature widow mothers and unmarried daughters.
19 Jesus! what a Friend for sinners! comes to mind. Words: J. Wilbur Chapman, 1910. Music: Hyfrydol, Rowland H. Prichard, 1830. The 1910 lyrics may have been the occasion that triggered a reminder of the story of 1894 and prompted the writing of the 1912 novel. And as much as Christiane Petersen disapproves of adventurous fiction (see several references to Anne, the Johansen daughter, who reads such novels all day long), one has to wonder if Captain Mayne Reid’s Adela, eller (or), Frelst av en engel (Saved by an Angel; Chicago: Skandinavens boghandel, 1890; a translation of his Afloat in the forest; or, A voyage among the tree-tops (New York, John W. Lovell Company, 1889)) has been an inspiration for Petersens 1895 book.