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Book Reviews

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Book Reviews

James D. Iversen. *The Nielsen Letters: Doorway to the Past*. Hampton, Iowa: The Franklin County Historical Society, 2014. vi + 186 pp., photographs, maps, appendices.

Reviewed by Jennifer Eastman Attebery

Immigrant letters are rich sources of information for historians of the migration to America from Scandinavia and are also significant as texts representing immigrant creativity and expressiveness. In this beautifully illustrated and designed volume we learn about the Danish immigrants who settled and lived at the Harriman-Nielsen Historic Farm in Hampton, Iowa, via the collection of 2,500 letters discovered at the farm after its donation to the Franklin County Historical Society. Most of these letters were written in Danish by six generations of the extended families of Christian and Anna Nielsen. The Nielsen family were Danish immigrants who came to the United States in 1905, establishing their first farm in the Hampton region in 1914, and eventually acquiring the Harriman property in 1920. With many in the family prolific letter-writers and nearly all great savers even as they moved from farm to farm, the Nielsen family left a mass of materials, including in addition to letters, photographs, account books, telegrams, postcards and greeting cards, recital programs, and sheet music.

These documents are arranged chronologically throughout the book as Iversen tells the story of the Niensens' youth in Denmark, their travel to America, development of their farm, trajectory of the next generations, recognition of their farm as a historic landmark, and continued family contacts and travels across the Atlantic. The many reproductions of letters and other documents immerse readers in the same kind of exciting experience one has in doing archival research, albeit in a very neatly arranged archives. The story of the Niensens' 1920 visit to Denmark, for example, which considerably reinforced the Danish-language skills of their children, is augmented with numerous images: the newspaper notation of their planned trip, a nephew's request that the Niensens bring him a Harley-Davidson motorcycle, the family's U.S. passport, pages from a travel journal, a photograph taken during their stay, and the Cunard Line's billing for passage.

Iversen makes these materials accessible to non-Danish readers through translation of well-selected examples, many reflecting the family's continuing interest in Danish traditions and institutions. A Christmas letter says, "The Danish Jule Nisser are marching," labelling a colored drawing in which three elves carry the Danish flag, a Christmas tree, and a musical instrument. A long letter from daughter Petrea, while attending Danebod College in Tyler, Minnesota, notes, "I have just been reading an article on The Danish Folk High School and found it resembled Danebod." Petrea continues with an extended comparison. An elaborate drawing in a 1930 letter details how to tat. A 1934 letter written by Petrea's sister Nielsine comments, "Petrea and I began practice at singing Danish Christmas carols several weeks ago, members of the church choir in our local Danish Church [St. John's Lutheran in Hampton]."

This volume is a valuable addition to the literature of Scandinavian America on several levels. The focus on a single very prolific family provides us with an especially rich set of documents translated for English readers. The sampling will inspire scholars and history buffs who want to know more to visit the full collection at the Franklin County Historical Society, where many of the letters not represented here are also translated into English. The collection's extension over time and several generations makes it especially valuable. The focus of immigration research has tended to be on the turn of the century period, and this collection brings us into the beginning of the twenty-first century with documents related to Danish family visits to Nielsine and her efforts to obtain National Register of Historic Places listing for the farm. Throughout the twentieth-century materials, we can see the importance of continuities in contact with Denmark. We gain a sense of the Danish occupation by Germany through letters received immediately after World War II. "[T]hey marched singing through the town, but we turned our backs to them, we gave absolutely no homage to the Germans, but we had to live among them," a relative wrote in 1946. With the Nielsen sisters we also experience the excitement of being able to fly to Denmark in 1948, where they attended numerous concerts at Tivoli as well as visiting with relatives. The sisters were devoted musicians throughout their lives, and the many documents of their participation in concerts and music clubs gives us a sense of the importance of music in many twentieth-century Scandinavian American households.

Iversen's book will appeal to general readers and historians, especially those with ties to or an interest in Scandinavia and its immigrants to America. The book's attractive design makes it appropriate as a gift book, but it also serves as a quick guide to the full collection available at Franklin County Historical Society.

Orm Øverland, ed. and trans. *From America to Norway: Norwegian-American Immigrant Letters 1838–1914*. Vol. 1: 1838–1870. Northfield, MN: Norwegian-American Historical Association, 2012. 472 pp., foreword, preface, references.

Reviewed by Anna Rue

Orm Øverland's translated volume of Norwegian immigrant letters sent from America back to Norway is a welcome addition to the body of Scandinavian immigrant writing available in English. This is the first in a series of volumes to be published by the Norwegian-American Historical Association (NAHA) Press, including an index, which is not included in this volume, though NAHA has made a provisional index available online (<http://www.naha.stolaf.edu/pubs/current/Index%20America%20to%20Norway%20Vol%201.pdf>). Broadly representative of immigrant correspondence, Øverland's book includes letters written by both men and women, as well as from settlers hailing from regions other than the Upper Midwest, including New York, Kansas, Illinois, Missouri, Nevada, and Texas. The volume also offers a depth of experience through several series of letters in an effort to capture "the life of the past," in the words of Todd Nichol (Foreword, 15), building relationships to particular family stories and experiences over time. The result is that one can begin to sense a feeling of collective experience surrounding nineteenth-century immigration while also enjoying the intimacy of following several personal stories told over the course of many years.

Readers who may be unfamiliar with interpreting letters as historical or literary documents are served well by the detailed introduction, which offers a useful guide for how one might read deeply into the representative collection. In it, Øverland models an interpretive approach to reading immigrant letters, considering factors such as the education of the author, the expressive nature of the text, the potential physical conditions under which it was written,

and more. The introduction also raises several issues to consider when reading mindfully, such as whether the letters were intended to be public texts (sometimes circulated widely throughout neighborhoods or even published in local newspapers) or private letters, but also how one can endeavor to interpret the letters ethically and without judgment. Øverland promotes thoughtful and respectful reading while also arguing that some amount of creative interpretation is necessary in order to bring the letters to life and evoke the same thoughts and feelings the authors intended to communicate.

In addition to providing general historical information in the introduction, Øverland includes specific notes after each letter, which readers will find helpful in understanding these immigrant letters more fully. The notes contextualize authors' references to relevant persons, family history, literature, locations, events, migration information, et cetera. They provide readers with a continued demonstration of how to begin interpreting immigrant letters, noting not only historical facts, but also contextualizing customs, attitudes, perspectives, and cultural factors. The painstaking amount of detail provided in many of the notes is useful for understanding familial ties referenced in the letters, but also for appreciating the complexities of life captured inside them, such as the intermingling of the Norwegian and English languages, naming traditions, the significance of various holidays, and the impact and experience of the Civil War. Øverland's notes nudge readers in the direction of making their own informed interpretations of the letters.

One of the advantages of reading a collection of letters such as this is being able to sense the traditional nature of shared immigrant correspondence borne out in the letters themselves. For example, authors of many early letters state that they would not wish to sway their friends and family members back in Norway one way or another in terms of their decision to emigrate. For whatever reason many authors were careful in the information they provided to their loved ones back home, perhaps not wishing to take blame for a painful decision to leave Norway or to be seen as a propagandist. The letters are, however, full of advice on what items to pack, how much money to bring, what routes to take to get where, et cetera—important information to impart to potential emigrants. Many authors also included unvarnished accounts of illness in certain settlement areas, quality of the land for farming, and working conditions for

young unmarried women, presumably to help their readers weigh the decision to emigrate from all possible perspectives within the physical space allotted in a single letter. A tall order, and one which is borne out in both individual and recognizable ways in this volume. Folklorists and historians alike will find much to consider in terms of the traditional and collective nature of expression present in these letters.

Øverland makes brief mention of photographs included in some letters, the majority of which had long since been separated from the accompanying letters when the Norwegian–American Historical Association of America began actively collecting them in the mid-1920s. Understandably, there are difficulties involved in the collection and inclusion of visual items like this. In the event, however, that an image or a drawing might have been preserved along with a letter it would have been a valuable inclusion, furthering the connections the reader is able to make to the authors, friends, and family members represented in these letters. This would have been stretching the scope of the work, however, whose precedent had already been set by the publication of a seven-volume Norwegian language series, *Fra Amerika til Norge* (1992–2011).

Historians, Scandinavianists, folklorists, American Studies enthusiasts, and general readers alike will all find value to this collection of immigrant letters to Norway. The communications themselves are rich, filled with advice for potential emigrants, accounts of experiences in their new home, quality of life, work, religious life, births and deaths, finances, politics, economics, and a myriad of other topics one expects from a large collection of personal correspondences. By translating these immigrant letters, Øverland in essence returns them to the Norwegian-American community, allowing subsequent generations to interpret their own origin story from the words of their forebears.

Petie Kladstrup. *In the Presence of Forever: The Story of the White Dove*.
fullyklad, 2014. 59 pp.
Reviewed by Inger Olsen

This slender volume tells a traditional story about emigration from Denmark to the United States in the nineteenth century, but not in quite the way to which readers may be accustomed. Instead of a straightforward historical narrative, Petie Kladstrup transforms her ancestors' experiences into a charming, fairy tale-like story about a portent—a white dove—which sustains a father in times of grief and ties the family history back in Denmark to the life they create for themselves in the U.S.

The book is divided into three parts: the first deals with Peder Nielsen's (1833-1916) life in Denmark before his decision to emigrate in 1867. The second part follows him to Illinois in 1870, while the third focuses on the family's move to Iowa in 1871. The first part of the story not only lays out the Niensens' reasons for emigrating, but also introduces the motif of the white dove, which reappears throughout the rest of the book, in times of trial, loss, and sorrow.

Peder Nielsen (1833-1916) emigrated to the U.S. in 1867. He had grown up on a sizeable farm in the neighborhood of the town of Nibe, west of Aalborg in northern Jutland, Denmark. He was not the oldest son, hence not heir to the ancestral farm. As this fact would have led to a life of servitude he decided to follow the allure of the promise of land in the U.S., where, if a person filled out and signed a letter of intent to become an American citizen, one was given 160 acres to homestead (after the Homestead Act of 1862, at least). Peder had furthermore fallen in love with "the most beautiful girl in the village" who had "accepted his proposal and ... promised to wait for him in Denmark" while he made a fortune and a home for them in America (5).

After the American Civil War, travel had become easy due to the introduction of steamships. The trip lasted ten days—as opposed to two months in the time of the old sailing ships—but it was still expensive, that is, "a farmhand would have to save his wages for a year to afford the ticket" (5).

Denmark had just been at war with the German Federation in 1864 and had experienced great losses in population and land. Added to that, changes in farming methods and being the second, third, or fourth sons, hence America and the allure of much and free land

persuaded many to make the trip. The news of free land was spread by advertising offices in Denmark run by, for example, the American railroads.

Before taking off Peder had tried army life but soon gave that up and heeded the call from his best friend Niels who asked him to come to the U.S. to join him and his wife. The independence and equality promised were strong incentives. The Indians' harassment was no deterrent.

The trip across the Atlantic could be harsh but one could learn some English on board the ship. However, a traveler should be wary of strangers, betting, and lack of knowledge of the American coinage. And one should not remain in New York. Peder had no problem with not staying in New York. He knew he was a country boy not a city boy.

Once in the U.S., Peder was eager to learn new farming methods and the use of the machinery such as the McCormick reaping machine-effective but dangerous. After two and a half years he had money and two return steamship tickets hence he came home for Christmas and his fiancé. She had, however, married someone else.

Upon hearing this Peder decided to stay at home for the duration of his stay in Denmark. No amount of coaching could get him to go visiting. Until shortly before his day of departure he agreed to come along for a family christening. At this event he met his future wife, the eighteen-year-old Mette Marie Sorensen. In the U.S. Peder had bragged about his first fiancé. There were few women out west and even fewer Danish women. Seeing Mette Marie, who had dreamt of going to the U.S., Peder "began to dream again." She had spirit and they left for America a few days later (13). Peder was eighteen years her senior.

When they arrived at Chabinese, Illinois in 1870 they found empty land, with no one to tell them what to do and how to farm nor anyone "to help them through any problems or comfort them when things were difficult" (15). Peder had worked in the area before; the first harvest was good and in 1871 their first baby was on its way. Soon they had two boys and one girl.

They had created a new family in place of the one they had left in Denmark. They also went through a transition which became almost a tradition among immigrants. Their language changed and their last name changed from Nielsen to Klaestrup to Kladstrup in order that

they might be properly identified as there were many Mette Maries and Peder Nielsens.

All went well until the day when their young daughter Meta came down with brain fever (16) and died from it. This was a hard blow to the family. However, the family increased (18) and another little girl was born after two more boys had arrived. As the family thus had increased, the Kladstrups began thinking about a bigger farm. They decided to leave Illinois and move to Iowa where they had friends. The railroads made a visit of inspection possible. Spurred by booklets extolling the possibilities to be found in northern Iowa, Peder went on a tour of inspection. The town he looked at was called Newell. It was originally settled in a swampy area but by the time Peder arrived the swamp had been drained. Newell had a newspaper and a school plus a Danish Lutheran church and there was segregation which meant people from different ethnic groups did not intermarry!

While in Newell, Peder heard that one of Niels' neighbors was selling 160 acres which Peder bought. Having registered the purchase with the authorities, Peder went back to Illinois to pack up his family. When they arrived in Iowa they found a squatter had settled on their land. As a consequence, Peder, Mette Marie and the children had to start their new life in a sod hut borrowed from Niels.

This hut became known as the cave among the members of the Kladstrup family. Eventually the squatter left and the Kladstrups could settle on *their* land. They had found what they had looked for when they had left Denmark.

Many years later, Grandpa Kladstrup was turning ninety and Grandma wanted to celebrate the event in grand style (35-6). The family was coming from all over the country except for young Don who was off reporting in the Middle East. Peder, the oldest, and Carol, the youngest, were violin players, and Grandpa took out his violin—"for later." The whole family partook in jigsaw puzzles. In the midst of the happy commotion Grandpa moved to "the front window and sat in total stillness looking out" (36). It was his habit to cat nap, play horse shoes, do woodworking; walk downtown to get the mail and have coffee with friends (39). He followed the baseball games; kept up with the lives of his family (40). His hearing and his eyes were getting weak and eventually he gave up driving on his own accord.

Grandma was busy in the kitchen with other women. The question: Had there "been any news of brother Chris?" None, "but

Arlo has gone to the hospital to see him" (41). When Arlo returned to tell Grandpa, Chris had died. Grandpa already knew because the white dove had come and was still there. This was the second sighting of the white dove (42).

Grandpa reminisced about his youth and childhood in Denmark. His parents were always busy doing chores. They only stopped in 1887 when diphtheria struck. The word spread while they were in church. All the usual socializing after church was cancelled. The disease was called "the strangling angel of children" (43). When diphtheria hit in Newell and also in Minnesota, people panicked and grasped at anything and all patent medicine such as burning "a mixture of turpentine and tar by the patient's bed." Only tracheotomy was a successful cure but "few doctors could or would perform surgery" (43-4).

The Kladstrups lost their share of relatives, who all had to be buried posthaste and without ceremony (45). In spite of all precautions, their eldest child, Nels, was stricken and died at the age of fifteen. Peder threw himself on the ground and remained there, crying while Mette Marie had to dispose of Nels' belongings right away. His books were buried in the woods. She could not make herself burn them with the rest of what he had owned. Meanwhile Peder remained prostrate, crying till the white dove showed itself for the first time. It settled on his arm and remained there for an hour while Peder petted it. Eventually he rose sitting up against a tree with the dove on his arm. When he made for the house the dove departed.

Peder apologized to the children for his behavior and he made them promise never to kill a white dove (49). A year later a little boy was born. Nels was to be his name. The white dove appeared again when Uncle Chris died and the birthday party was cancelled. This time the white dove "settled in a tree by the front door." The white dove did not appear when Grandma died three years later. Grandpa felt its presence instead.

When Grandpa died at age ninety-eight, no white dove appeared. His joy and the comfort he had given to other people made its appearance unnecessary. An attempt to record the story about the white dove told by the grandfather himself was not too successful—perhaps the story was too precious to retell (56).

However, a song "The Message of the Dove" was composed and a daughter incorporated the design of a dove into her quilts. A dove

was carved for Grandpa's church in Newell and a second one was created for a church in West Des Moines, Iowa.

This lovely book tells a beautiful story, but the addition of a family tree would make it easier to navigate among the generations. One factual mistake pertains to the losses Denmark suffered as a result of the war of 1864. Denmark lost two-fifths of its territory and one-third of its population, not one-third of both as indicated on page six. (For more detail on that situation, see Roar Skovmand, *Folkestyrets fødsel, 1830-1870*, vol. 11 of *Danmarks Historie*, ed. John Danstrup and Hal Koch (København: Politikens Forlag, 1964).

Overall, the book is a delightful, thought-provoking, and highly personal account of the challenges faced by immigrants in the U.S. in the nineteenth century as well as the reasons behind their decisions to undertake such a life-changing project. A strong point is the photo on the cover of the book, which depicts the family in the U.S., which is juxtaposed with the family photo on page fifty-four taken on the occasion of the Kladstrups' forty-fifth wedding anniversary. In both cases an indication of the year would have been helpful. The photos show how the family grew in size and how it prospered in the U.S.

