The Spirit of Hans Christian Andersen in the United States

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Hans Christian Andersen (1805-75) was a great traveler and would undoubtedly have liked to visit the United States, in which he took a keen interest. As his fame grew, he received numerous invitations from his admirers across the Atlantic. However, as is well known, he became morbidly afraid of sea voyages after his dear friend, Henriette Wulff, perished in a fire onboard ship in 1858. ¹ Prone to seasickness and careful of his health and well being, the aging author found the prospect of the long Atlantic voyage daunting and never undertook it.

Andersen's fascination with America was natural for someone with as an inquiring mind as his, particularly given the great numbers of European emigrants to North America at the time and the concomitant belief in the United States as a land of opportunity, progress, and...
innovation. Andersen was well read and received publications from around the world, including several from the United States. He was therefore quite familiar with specific American natural wonders and scientific advances. Even more importantly, Andersen was a member of the cosmopolitan intelligentsia of his time. He was well connected in cultural circles in Europe and knew Scandinavians who had traveled in the United States, including the Norwegian violinist Ole Bull and the Swedish singer Jenny Lind.

**Andersen on America**

Although the beginnings of Andersen’s popularity in the United States date to the mid-1840s, he himself was well aware of the allure of “America” much earlier. As early as 1836 Andersen poked gentle fun at the myth of America as the “promised land” in his satirical song *Brodre, meget langt herfra* (Brothers, very, very far away). The song is part of the musical play *Festen paa Kenilworth* by C.E.F. Weyse, based on the novel *Kenilworth* by Sir Walter Scott. In the play, the lazy adventurer Michael Lambourne sings a paean to America together with his drinking buddies. In their romanticized view, America is full of fields of gold and silver, while pre-roasted pigeons lie ready-to-eat in their nests. It’s just too bad that it’s so very far away.\(^2\)

Andersen also alludes to the United States in his travelogue *Pictures of Sweden* (*I Sverrig*, elsewhere translated as *In Sweden*) from 1851. The author describes how on “Bålstad’s picturesque shore,” the river “widens and rolls its billows majestically in a woodland landscape, as large and extended as if it were in North America.” In a similarly idealized tone, another passage describes how “a pair of wild buffalos were fighting on America’s auriferous soil, and their horns tore up the green sward that covered the rich gold vein.”\(^3\)

A decade later, in his 1861 story, *New Century’s Goddess*, Andersen offers a somewhat more critical view, asking: “Will she come from the new-found land of Columbus, the land of freedom, where the native is hunted and the African is a beast of burden, the land from where we heard the Song of Hiawatha?” These comments show a sophisticated understanding of American social conditions rendered in typical Andersenian irony. Also, the familiarity with Longfellow’s *Hiawatha*, published in 1855 demonstrates his knowledge of the American cultural scene. In the same text Andersen also mentions “California’s
fairyland, where the redwood holds high its crown as king of the earth’s forests.” In other words, Andersen was an astute and informed observer of the new world – he was familiar with the vitality, the scenery, the culture, the myth, and the shortcomings.4

In a prescient story, *Millennium*, from 1852, Andersen envisions young people from America, the land of the future, visiting Europe and appreciating its history and cultural legacy. He writes:

Yes, thousands of years from now men will fly on wings of steam through the air, across the ocean. The young inhabitants of America will visit old Europe. They will come to see the monuments and the great cities, which will then lie in ruins, just as we in our time make pilgrimages to the ruined splendors of Southern Asia. Thousands of years from now, they will come!

. . . . “To Europe!” cry the young sons of America. “To the land of our ancestors, that glorious land of memory and legends! To Europe!” The ship of air comes. It is crowded with passengers, for this is a much faster crossing than by sea. The electromagnetic wire under the ocean has already cabled the number of the aerial travelers. Already Europe is in sight - the coast of Ireland. But the passengers are still asleep and will not be called until they are over England

. . . . Here they stay a whole day.

. . . . “There is really a great deal to be seen in Europe,” says the young American proudly, “And we’ve seen it in eight days; and it is quite possible, as the great traveler” (and here he names one of his contemporaries) “tells us in his famous book, *How to See All Europe in Eight Days.*”5

Demonstrating Andersen’s intellectual curiosity and phenomenal imagination, *Millennium* is an amusing and almost eerie precursor to the 1969 comedy film, *If It’s Tuesday, This Must Be Belgium!*

**Scandinavian-American Ties**

Well-educated Americans traveled to Europe in great numbers during the nineteenth century and took an informed interest in European culture and social conditions, including those of the Nordic countries. Similarly, a number of cosmopolitan Scandinavians moved with ease between Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and the United
States, and Andersen numbered many members of the European and American intelligentsia among his friends and acquaintances. In addition to an interest in the arts and literature, progressive circles in America and Europe shared an interest in various innovative utopian movements, abolition, and the improvement of social conditions. For instance, the Swedish author Fredrika Bremer wrote extensively about her travels in America, e.g., *Hemmen i den nya vården (Homes of the New World)*, published in 1853-54.\(^6\)

Andersen was pleased with his growing popularity in the United States. In an 1846 letter to his patron, Jonas Collin, Andersen cites a letter from his good friend, the Norwegian violinist Ole Bull, noting that “the English translations of my novels were pirated in America and winged their way in cheap editions by the thousands in the New World; ... *Only a Fiddler* had been so enormously successful that everywhere in America people had asked him about me!”\(^7\) *Only a Fiddler* received good reviews in Germany, as well. This success must have been particularly gratifying for Andersen since Kierkegaard had panned the work in the Danish press in 1838. Ole Bull’s successful tours in the United States and resulting prosperity certainly did not escape Andersen’s attention either, as the author was not unmindful of the need for self-promotion. The Swedish singer, Jenny Lind-Goldschmidt (1820-87), an early romantic interest of Andersen’s, had had a wildly successful and financially profitable tour in the United States in 1850, a fact that must have further appealed to Andersen’s financial imagination, as well.

Henriette Wulff, whose brother worked in the Danish West Indies and who
planned to retire there, encouraged Andersen to travel to the United States. As reasons to visit, Henriette refers to Andersen’s Swedish friends, Lind and Bremer who had both profitably spent time in America. The well-known American socialists and philanthropists, Marcus and Rebecca Spring, friends of Henriette, also attempted to persuade Andersen to visit, noting his fame on that continent. In 1855 and '56, Andersen was consulting the map of America and was even making “practical calculations.” However, as mentioned above, Miss Wulff’s tragic death effectively ended Andersen’s American travel plans.

Andersen nevertheless continued to cultivate his international and American contacts. For instance, in 1861 he reports meeting the American sculptor, William Wetmore Story, in Rome and giving a reading in the latter’s home:

At 2 o’clock I went with Jonas [Collin the younger] to see the American sculptor Story, who is very rich and lives in the Palazzo Barberini – very sumptuous. A lot of Americans, Englishmen, and Frenchmen, too, came there. I made cutouts for the children; had to read the beginning of “The Ugly Duckling” in English, but this was too much for me and I got Story to read the rest. A brother of the poet Longfellow was there, also the poet Robert Browning.8

“Jenny Lind, three-quarter length portrait of a woman, three-quarters to the left, facing front, seated,” photograph, September 14, 1850.

Erik Dal, Director of the Danish Society for Language and Literature and literary historian, notes:

In his later years, Andersen had a good many American acquaintances. Some he met abroad, others were temporary residents in Denmark, and still others visitors in Copenhagen where they would often try to get an introduction to the famous bachelor. These are but casual in Andersen's life, though American Scandinavianists should be aware of the fact that the writer Bayard Taylor brought a friend with him when visiting Andersen, and that one single letter from this friend was kept in Andersen's files, listed by the Royal Library under "Less Known Foreigners." His name ... was Willard Fiske.

Daniel Willard Fiske (1831–1904) was an eminent American scholar who specialized in Scandinavia, and whose famed collection of Icelandic materials may be found at Cornell University. In 1874, at a dinner that included the American Ambassador to Denmark, Andersen offered a toast in which he emphasized the close relations between Denmark and the United States.

Andersen's interest in America may also be deduced from the numerous images Andersen pasted in the scrapbooks he made for several children of friends in his circle. His collected images were cut from newspapers, magazines, and picture sheets with occasional comments or verses by Andersen. For instance, Jonas Collin's 1862 Billedbog features a cartoon "A Naval Arm, or, a Blow in the Rear" celebrating the Union naval capture of New Orleans as well as an image entitled "The Virginian War Steamer Empire, Under a Flag of Truce Arriving from Norfolk off Fortress Monroe with Northern Refugees." Hans Christian Ørsted's 1869 Billedbog features images of Native Americans set in impressive lake-side Minnesota and an Iowa prairie.

Andersen's American Fans

As Andersen's fame spread from Europe to America, he was described in the American press as one of the cultural figures in the Nordic "pantheon," which included Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, Bertel Thorvaldsen, and Esias Tegnér. It was even argued that Andersen eventually occupied such a significant part in the American life of
letters that he could be considered an American writer. Indeed, the English-language version of Andersen's last novel Lykke-Peer (Lucky Peer) came out in New York before being issued in London. According to Jean Hersholt, the Danish American actor and great Andersen popularizer in the United States, a total of 14 Andersen stories were first published in the American Riverside Monthly Magazine for Young Children and Scribner's Monthly. According to Herbert Rowland, the first American literary review of a book by Andersen appeared in the Harbinger in 1845. The work in question was The Improvisatore (Improvisatore). This piece was published concurrently in Britain and the United States, as were Wonderful Stories for Children (from the various Eventyr collections) in 1846, and The True Story of My Life (Mit eget eventyr uden digtning) in 1847. Commentators of Andersen's works included such noted contemporary American men of letters as Charles A. Dana, Richard Henry Stoddard, George William Curtis, and Hjalmar Hjorth Boyesen. The more than seventy American reviews of Andersen range over a period of decades in the late nineteenth century, attesting to the author's popularity. The Improvisatore was reviewed several times over various decades.

Unlike today, it was Andersen's novels rather than his fairytales that attracted a large readership and attained great popularity. The Improvisatore review in the Harbinger was by associate editor Charles A. Dana (1819-97), who later became an influential journalist and writer. At the time he wrote the review, Dana was part of the Brook Farm utopian community associated with American transcendentalism, though Dana became quite conservative in later life. Rowland notes that Dana's Harbinger review "exhibits several features that came to characterize the general response to Andersen in the United States. First of all, it is quite positive, if not uncritical. It discerns a certain infelicity of form in the novel but affirms its (Northern) idealism and sensitive decorum as well as the predominance of feeling and imagination over thought and plan in it." Thirty years later in 1875, George William Curtis (1824-92), a prolific writer and civil service reformer wrote in Harper's about Improvisatore:

It is one of the books which are full of Italy, so that as you read it in the Valley of the Connecticut, or wherever you may be, you are transported to that far country, and feel and see the very Italy of which in the land itself you are
only sometimes conscious. This is the charm of a few books only.¹⁷

Andersen’s *In Sweden* was reviewed in 1851 by Charles Godfrey Leland in the *International Magazine*. Leland writes:

> The book, to those who are not repelled by a certain quaintness of manner from the enjoyment of a work of true genius, will form a permanent and delightful addition to those pictures of many lands, which the enterprise and accomplishment of modern travelers is creating.¹⁸

William Dean Howells discussed Andersen’s *O.T.* in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1870; Richard Henry Stoddard asserted in *Putnam’s Magazine* in 1870 regarding the perennially popular *Improvisatore* that “There is something child-like in most of the writers of Northern Europe, and Andersen is the most child-like of all of them.”¹⁹ The Norwegian-American Hjalmar Hjorth Boyesen, who also wrote about Andersen in the American press after the latter’s death, positively
reviewed Andersen's travelogue *A Poet's Bazaar* in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1871.

**Literary Contacts: Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Horace E. Scudder**

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-82) and Horace Scudder (1838-1902), who were neighbors in Cambridge, Massachusetts, were two of Andersen's most important American literary contacts—the first because of his national and international stature, the latter because of the effort he took to publish Andersen and his deep personal appreciation of the author. Longfellow, as a scholar of European literature, was familiar with Andersen. The latter knew about Longfellow, primarily through Henriette Wulff, who thought highly of the American author. Although they were enthusiastic about each other's work, Longfellow and Andersen never met. They did exchange letters and photos and sent messengers to each other with letters of recommendation. Andersen much appreciated Longfellow's gift of *Evangeline*. He wrote in his diary that Longfellow's poetry helped him cope when he was feeling melancholy.²⁰

Much of Andersen's fame in the United States can be credited to Scudder, who was an author, editor, and publisher. Scudder wrote to and about Andersen and published a number of his stories in *The Riverside Magazine* between 1855 and 1867. In fact, it is thanks to Scudder that several of Andersen's stories first appeared in English in the United States before they were made available to the European public. Scudder even learned Danish and wrote to Andersen in that language.²¹ According to Jackie Wullschlager's biography, *Hans Christian Andersen: The Life of a Storyteller*:

Scudder had been trying to open communications with Andersen since 1862, but Andersen was a poor correspondent with any but his closest friends, and it took until 1868 for him to respond. Scudder had been a devotee of Andersen since childhood. "I remember with what a half-terrified wholly fascinated sensation I used to steal to the bookshelves and get down a book that had in it your story of 'The Red Shoes,'" he wrote. "I read everything of yours that I could find. What marvellous little life you discovered
in the humble objects around me! ... You gave a voice to the very tongs of the fireplace.”  

Andersen received $500 for the first twelve stories sent to Scudder for publication in the *Riverside Magazine*. In November 1868 Andersen sent Scudder “The Dryad,” a story relating to the 1867 Exhibition in Paris of which the author said “I consider it as one of my best.”

The correspondence between Andersen and Scudder, *The Andersen-Scudder Letters*, (1862-75) includes insights into the financial benefits that Andersen gained from this association. In 1870 Scudder wrote to Andersen about *Lykke Peer*, which was soon to appear in *Scribner’s Monthly* (which had replaced *The Riverside Magazine* as Andersen’s American publishing venue). Scudder enthused:

I am delighted with the story. It really seems to me one of the brightest, most *human* and most attractive stories which I have read from your pen. The characters surely must be from life, they are so real. I find the greatest pleasure in translating it, especially after the very kind manner in which you were pleased to speak of my work.  

I have made arrangements with Scribner & Co. by which they shall print the story in three numbers of their magazine, beginning with the January number which appears about the middle of December, and then, say about the middle of March Hurd & Houghton will expect to add it in book form to their Edition of your works. You will not be the loser by this arrangement, for Scribner & Co. will first pay you liberally for its use in the magazine and Hurd & Houghton will afterwards pay for its use in book form....

One of Andersen’s lesser-known correspondents from the 1860s and ‘70s was Louis Bagger, a Danish-American journalist, editor, and attorney. Among other things, Bagger helped Scudder in translating some of Andersen’s fairy tales into English. As a young man, Bagger had met Andersen in Copenhagen in 1863, and some letters were exchanged between the two after Bagger moved to the United States, Andersen addressing Bagger as his “Dear Young Friend.” Of Scudder, Andersen says:

It makes me very happy that you and Mr. Scudder have become acquainted, that you have become friends, and
that you speak so very well of him. This corresponds so exactly to the opinion I have formed of him. I hear with great satisfaction your decision concerning his translation, as you know English so well, and understand Danish thoroughly. It is reasonable that there are errors and some place and personal names incorrectly given in Mr. Scudder's translation of my fairy tales, but these errors will be corrected in the new edition.25

Possibly the most poignant of Andersen's American letters was addressed to the American politician and newspaper editor, Whitelaw Reid, to whom he wrote in 1875 concerning the donations that American children had sent to him, due to a misunderstanding about Andersen's financial status. The author was by no means as destitute as was mistakenly believed in the United States, but he was touched by the children's concern. In answer to Reid, Andersen wrote:

It afforded me great pleasure to receive the volumes about America, with their beautiful illustrations, after your having so heartily interpreted my utterances about the subscriptions raised in my favor, when the dear children broke their savings-boxes in order to support their tale-teller, whom they believed in want. ... I rejoice at this gift, the dearest that I could be granted to me from the powerful country where I am happy to have so many friends, young and old. Now I do not only read about but I have before my eyes this beautiful country, where my age and delicate state of health will never allow me to come. The precious work, "Picturesque America," is to me a dear present, and will be preserved after me as a memory of the American youths' love of their old tale teller....26

Andersen's spirit has been alive in the United States for more than 150 years. While many children may not be aware of the original inspiration of blockbuster animated cartoons such as Don Bluth's Thumbelina or Disney's The Little Mermaid, Andersen's legacy lives on in the United States even today, for example in New York City, by a large statue in Central Park of Andersen reading with a duckling at his feet. Other significant statues are located in Solvang, California, Elk Horn and Kimballton, Iowa.
Not surprisingly, Danish Americans have a deep appreciation for the humor and depth of Andersen’s thoughts and his writing. The Museum of Danish America celebrates Andersen as do other Danish-American organizations. The Danish-American actor Jean Hersholt left a lasting legacy by his tireless editing and English translation of Andersen’s writings and his generous and important donation of Anderseniana to the Library of Congress. 27 It is a pity Andersen did not reach the shores of the United States—a country he wrote about, felt close to, and a country that continues to remember and honor him.

Notes


Brødre, meget langt herfra,
over salten vande,
rejser sig Amerika
med de gyldne strande,
det er der Fugl Fønix bor:
guld og sølv på marken gror,
og i skovens skygge
stegte duer bygge.
Hvor frydeligt!
Gud, hvor det er nydeligt!
Skade, at Amerika
ligge skal så langt herfra!

[Brothers, very, very far,
Beyond ocean waters briny
Surfaces America
With her beaches gold and shiny.
There the Phoenix Bird hangs out,
Fields with gold and silver sprout
In the shadows of the forest
Roasted pigeons build their nest.
How delightful!
God, how beautiful!]
Too bad that America
lies so very, very far.


16 Rowland, 31.

17 Ibid., 35.

18 Ibid., 46.

19 Ibid., 40.


21 Scudder, 88, 91; see footnote 16.


23 Scudder, 85.

24 Ibid., 86.

25 Some of Louis Bagger's letters are in the Library of Congress. Bagger's family allowed the authors to photograph a previously unpublished image of Bagger. Andersen to Bagger Jan 4, 1872.


Works Cited


