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The Danish Immigrant Experience in the Fiction of Enok Mortensen

by RUDOLF J. JENSEN

INTRODUCTION

Here are several short quotations from Enok Mortensen’s fiction for the purpose of showing its primary themes:

"...for you emigrants, nothing is ever as good as it was in Denmark...you always have to compare...Over here one always possesses a peculiar unrest—only another hundred dollars, a thousand, or a million dollars more. In the old country everything was ordered and secure...Sons followed in the footsteps of their fathers, but as a rule they didn't get any farther either...Here in America it was the Golden Chance that egged one on, that always pushed one feverishly forward...It wasn't only the possibility of scraping some money together that bound him to his adopted land; it was the right to stand alone and independent...I am an immigrant—that is the crux of it—because of it one has a split personality, a damned rootlessness; nowhere is one at home, nowhere at peace."

Following is a brief biography of the Danish-American writer and historian, Enok Mortensen. However, the major portion of what follows discusses his four prose works in terms of delineating the problems and conflicts faced by the first-generation Danish-Americans in the United States as they are shown in Mortensen’s fiction.

Enok Mortensen was born in 1902 in Copenhagen and emigrated with his family to the United States in 1919. He was formally educated at Iowa State Teacher’s College, Grand View Seminary, the University of Minnesota, and the Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, California.
Mortensen taught at the following American folk schools: Nysted, Nebraska; Danebod, Tyler, Minnesota; and Atterdag, Solvang, California. He was ordained as a minister in the American Evangelical Lutheran Church (AELC) in 1929, after which he served congregations in Chicago, Illinois, Salinas, California, Tyler, Minnesota, and Des Moines, Iowa. He has been a U.S. State Department lecturer in Denmark and a Fullbright lecturer at Askov Folk School several times. In 1954, he was awarded the "Knight of Dannebrog Cross" by King Frederik IX. His fictional publications include four prose works: *Mit Folk* (1932), *Således blev jeg hjemløs* (1934), *Jeg vælger et Land* (1936), *Den lange plovfure* (1984), as well as one play, "Livets Lykke" (1933). Mortensen's historical works include *Danish-American Life and Letters: A Bibliography* (1945), *The Danish-American Emigrant* (1950), *Stories from our Church* (1952), *Seventy-five years at Danebod* (1961), *The Danish-American Lutheran Church* (1967), *Schools for Life: The Grundtvigian Folk Schools in America* (1977), and *A Danish Boyhood* (1981).

With the exception of one story, "Hjaltrupgaard med Plus," the protagonists in the collection of nine short stories in *Mit Folk* are Danish immigrants who are definitely poor—often they are beggars or hobos. All are first-generation Danish-Americans who came to America with the hope of quickly becoming wealthy and then expecting to return to their home district in the old country as local boy made good. Six stories are set in Chicago and three occur in rural midwestern areas. The characters represent the following backgrounds and occupations: a "jysk" farmhand, a cabinetmaker from Køge, a painter's apprentice from Kalundborg, and a plasterer's apprentice, a tailor, and a "husmand" all from northern Sjælland.

"En knusende Pæn Begravelse" is the ironic tale of a down-and-out unemployed painter whose wife dies from malnutrition and overwork in a laundry. Yet, Jens Madsen, left with two young daughters, perceives a fleeting sense of elation at the funeral. "Firkløverer," "Farvel, Holbæk," and "Sne," portray the cross-country hobo-like travels of a
Chicago factory-worker dying from work-induced tuberculosis, the death and tawdry funeral of an indigent alcoholic, and the physically marginal life of two Chicago beggars at Christmas (one of whom dies on Christmas eve). The stories, "Retired," and "Bachelor's Jul," describes the economically tenuous existence of midwestern farmers during a period of wildly fluctuating crop prices and rampant land speculation. In general, the nine stories in Mit Folk show the Danish immigrant in America, between the years of 1880 and 1920, to be a virtually powerless victim of socio-economic forces in a land where material gain was the foremost goal and individual health and well-being were generally disregarded. Even the few organizations of Danish immigrants, i.e., the church and the brotherhood, are represented as little more than institutions supportive of a mindless upper-class sociability.

On the other hand, the epic quest of Niels Nord, the protagonist in the two novels, Således blev jeg Hjemløs and Jeg vælger et Land, is noticeably more optimistic in both its description of successful upward mobility for the immigrant, as well as its portrayal of a positive search for identity among the first generation in a new country.

To those familiar with Danish literature, the title of Således blev jeg Hjemløs, is the classic statement of alienation from Denmark spoken by Mikkel Thorgersen in Johannes V. Jensen's novel, Kongens Fald (1900-1901). This theme of alienation is quite clearly presented in the novels written by Enok Mortensen as they describe the experiences of the Danish immigrant in America.

Niels Nord is distinctly different from characters in Enok Mortensen's short stories. Niels has completed his carpentry apprenticeship in Denmark and is the only son of a comparatively wealthy farm-owning family in Sønderjylland. Initially, he looks upon his emigration to Chicago as only a temporary stay of a couple years after which he will return to take over the family farm. Of further advantage to Niels is the fact that he can live with his mother's brother, who has made his fortune in city garbage collection. This uncle also finds Niels his first job on the assembly-line of a window frame manufacturer.
Although Niels at first sees himself as a temporary visitor in Chicago, his experiences during his first year cause him to suspect that he is establishing strong ties to America.

“What is it about America that grabs and binds one with invisible bonds? . . . Niels knew well enough that it was more than a quest for the dollar; rather it was the adventurer’s indomitable life drive and optimism that was still in the air and cast a clear glow over the material and prosaic . . . there were still people who believed in America as the promised land.”

During his first two years in Chicago, almost all of Niels’ experiences and personal ties are with working-class people. It is also the working classes with whom his sympathies lie. In fact, he becomes an urban proletarian, subject to the cyclical patterns of employment and unemployment typical of this period in American history. His friends include an unemployable alcoholic Pole (Tom Litmisky), married to a Danish woman, who finally hangs himself rather than embarrass his daughter, Marie, who later becomes a prostitute as the only viable means of supporting her siblings; a carpenter (Marløv) who works only irregularly because of an insatiable drive to write the great Danish-American novel; a painter (Andersen) who dies from lead-paint poisoning because some American companies find it cheaper to use; an alcoholic drifter (Johs. Olesen) who becomes a “born again Christian”; and a carpenter (Felsen) who is a frustrated sculptor and because he is also a socialist agitator is unemployable in Chicago.

The final chapters of Således blev jeg Hjemløs are the love story of Niels and Thora Jensen. She is a schoolteacher born in America and he is now the foreman of a furniture factory. The novel ends with the outbreak of World War I and Niels’ return to Denmark. He farms for about a year, when he finally recognizes that he is neither a Dane nor a farmer.

Jeg vælger et Land describes the married life of Niels Nord from about 1918 to 1929, and the beginning of the “great depression.” The novel is primarily Niels’ quest to discover what it means to be a Danish-American. And while the
mood is optimistic—reflecting Niels' personal and economic success—significant themes reflect an intense and blind American chauvinism following the war; the language conflict for the second-generation; the individual, economic, and social stress of private entrepreneurship; a continuous identity problem for the first-generation; economic exploitation and speculation; political graft; an absence of class solidarity among the American proletariat; a correlative lack of class consciousness among all socio-economic strata; and, finally, a pervasive sense of optimism among all immigrant groups for a better life—especially for their children—in a pluralistic but egalitarian country.

The gradual process of Americanization for Niels is represented by such events as English language and home-building classes in night school; ownership of his own construction company; buying a car; becoming an American citizen, driving across the country with his family, building his own "mansion;" speculating on the stockmarket; voting for Hoover in 1928, and finally suffering economic ruin in the Wall Street crash of 1929. Yet, Niels retains his optimistic faith in America and philosophically concludes that although one can fall farther in this country, it is also easier to raise oneself both economically and socially.

Finally, with regard to Mortensen's most recently published novel, *Den lange plovfure* (1984), it also continues to show the basic themes of alienation among both first and second generation Danish-Americans. Despite the fact that *Den lange plovfure* has a Grundtvigian minister, Peder Bro, as its protagonist, the negative themes—particularly within the Bro family—are so dominant that there is little reason to believe Pastor Bro possessed any quality of human warmth. While it could be argued that he did minister to the spiritually needy among various Danish-American settlements, this was surely a Pyrrhic victory inasmuch as he lost his nuclear family along the way. *Den lange plovfure*, as the last published work of fiction written by Enok Mortensen (although this novel was originally written in the late 1930s), is also his most pessimistic. The primary theme of alienation is shown in four basic areas of human relationships.
1) alienation of Danish immigrants from the Danish society of the old country.

2) alienation of first-generation Danish immigrants from the new American society.

3) alienation of the second-generation Danish-Americans from their parents, as well as from Denmark.

4) alienation between husbands and wives, i.e., spouses, in terms of conflicting identities with the past and with their ever-evolving selves in America.

Because of this dominant theme of alienation in *Den lange plovfure*, "long" really is shown to be "narrow" with regard to Peder Bro, the protagonist.

The common theme in the fiction of Enok Mortensen is very clearly the identity problem faced by the first-generation immigrant in the United States. The majority of his characters and those for whom he shows the most understanding and sympathy are the lower classes.

The lower socio-economic class—both employed and unemployed—might well be considered the collective protagonist in Mortensen's writing. They may lead a physically marginal existence, but they are also more conscious of the nature of the conflicts inherent in their situation as first-generation immigrants, and family is the most important value in their lives, with the exception of Peder Bro. Enok Mortensen's fiction presents a composite, though selective, picture of the nature of life in the United States for the urban Danish immigrants—their struggles, their defeats, and their limited successes.

**FOOTNOTE**

This article was adapted from a paper presented, originally, at the conference on Scandinavian Immigration, Settlement, and Acculturation, University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin, August 27-30, 1984.