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## Enok Mortensen as a Danish-American

by ERLING DUUS

Many years ago, Enok Mortensen wrote about the impact of the first singing of Kristian Østergaard's "Bag Bølgende Have"<sup>1</sup> at a meeting at Nysted Folk School. For the first time, Danish-Americans had a song which moved beyond nostalgia to affirmation. It filled a need which had become powerful. It gave expression to the fact that the kind of rich cultural and spiritually generative Danishness which came to flower in the Grundtvigian movement had become implanted in the spaciousness of the plains and the prairies, and was transformed in this liberating new environment. This article<sup>2</sup> was characteristic of the work and vision of Enok Mortensen as a Danish American. We see him not merely identifying events, but creating a history and a mythology.

This dream of the Grundtvigians in America, as it was originally formulated by F. L. Grundtvig and his associates from the Danish Folk Society,<sup>3</sup> was that these Danish immigrants inspired by a unique folk-spirit would realize the promise and immensity of America and become a leaven in this great land precisely as they continued to live out the power of the Danish folk-spirit. In that context the church and particularly the folk schools were built, not for the temporary use of an immigrant generation, but as citadels from which Danish American youth of perpetual generations would be inspired and renewed for this high purpose. Enok Mortensen writes of his experience as a wandering, penniless immigrant youth in America, and of walking over the hills in a Nebraska summer to find the Nysted Folk School.<sup>4</sup> There his life was changed and filled with spirit and purpose. In him, the old dreamers found a youth with the imagination and talent to serve a great vision.

The experience of most immigrants was that they could

not live in two cultures. And, inasmuch as they were new Americans, they felt an inner compulsion to place the old country and its culture behind them. The process was painful and the divisions of the heart remained, but forgetting was seen as crucial in order that the second generation might live without ambivalence. Most immigrant groups hoped that their descendants would honor and perhaps celebrate the land of their fathers, but fundamental loyalty and belonging could not be divided.

But the Grundtvigians saw the issue differently. They realized, a bit reluctantly, that their children and grandchildren would be Americans and not Danes. But they could see no reason why their generation could not continue to live in vibrant lineage with Denmark and with its folk-spirit, a continuing dynamic intercourse between two lands and people. Indeed, they felt that such a lineage and intercourse was critical if they were to avoid getting lost in the American wilderness.

The usual commentary of historians and others is that the Grundtvigians were attached to a hopeless and even a foolish dream. Certainly, it is said, this was a dream destined for defeat. No doubt. Most of the evidence supports that conclusion. But in the glibness of such assumptions and judgments, it is likely that we miss the fact that there can be a high creativity engendered by living in creative tension between two cultures. And against such judgments we place the life and work of Enok Mortensen, who exemplified this creative tension. He was, in the richest conceivable sense, a Danish-American. His identity and unique personality came together in the hyphen. He lived both cultures imaginatively without suffering either to be diminished in his mind or heart. Most importantly, he left behind a legacy of achievement literally awash with this dual identity.

As suggested earlier, Enok Mortensen was a myth-maker. He interpreted the story of Danish emigration to America in terms of an expansive faith in the synthesis which could be effected as Danishness mingled with the American environment. What he longed for and what was the motivating purpose of his life was a Danish American

culture rich with the old intimacies of word and spirit through the folk memory, and at the same time a people greatly touched by the Whitman-like chords of mystical democracy. The final ascending scenes of *Den Lange Plovfure*<sup>5</sup> clearly strike this theme. But Mortensen was intensely aware of the tragedy inherent in the immigrant saga. He lived and dreamed a vision, but was not an optimist.

It is not intended to depreciate Enok Mortensen's contributions to simply say that his greatest contribution was himself — the way in which he embodied and modeled the Danish American, took the identity upon himself and turned it into a life work. It would be hard to picture the landscape of Danish America without him. Were it not for Mortensen, this ideal would have assumed far less of an incarnation. There was no one, at least in later years, who had the will, the possibility, and the talent to give it life. More than anyone else did or could, he made many believe in it. He was so deeply Danish and so fully and finely American. In his presence and being, those disparate realities played provocatively upon each other and generated a deep and fresh stream. He accomplished a great deal. He helped to formulate a myth, and was the historian of a unique group of people. And, if there are, even at this late date, some who continue to think of themselves as Danish Americans, much of the credit goes to Enok Mortensen.

#### FOOTNOTES

- 1 *In Far Distant Northland*. Østergaard was an immigrant pastor, poet and writer. This song was translated by Dr. Johannes Knudsen and is found in *A Heritage of Song*, published by The Danish Interest Conference, Lutheran Church of America. It also appears in the brochure of the Danish American Heritage Society.
- 2 Author has a vivid recollection of the article, but cannot identify the publisher.
- 3 *Danske i Amerika*. C. Rasmussen Publishing Company 1907, pp. 167-180.
- 4 Enok Mortensen, *Schools for Life*, pages 7, 8 and 9, Danish American Heritage Society (out of print).
- 5 Enok Mortensen, *Den Lange Plovfure*, (Copenhagen, Erichson's Forlag, 1984).