

NORSE AMERICA IN FICTION

By Karsten Roedder

DURING the past few years, America has been subjected to the innovation of Scandinavian literature *en masse*. Following the publication of Johan Bojer's "The Great Hunger" approximately five years ago, Knut Hamsun, Johannes V. Jensen, Sigrid Undset, Martin Andersen-Nexö, and half a dozen minor writers, such as Frank Heller, have been sufficiently exploited to establish a market value for the literature of the North.

The entire population of Norway corresponds in number to that of Brooklyn. There are as many Norwegians — first and second generation — in America, as there are in Norway. Although not generally recognized, a Norse-American literature actually exists, centred about the middle west. It is a curious literature, with a pro-

nounced flair for mediocrity. It is stripped of originality. It is painfully superficial. It is sentimental, false, humiliating. The literati of Norway treat it with manifest contempt.

For years, ever since the present reviewer became acquainted with Norse-American literature, he has looked forward to the publication of such a work as "Wild Geese". It is a book which eventually would have had to appear. That it happens to be written in English, and not in Norwegian, matters but little. "Wild Geese" is as much part of this Norse-American literature as it is of native American writing. Caleb Gare of this novel is as definitely a Scandinavian as is the author, though Miss Ostenson in no way reveals his nationality. In fact, "Wild Geese" is the intrinsic climax of the Norse-American literature. As a contribution to the immigrant belles lettres of America it is equally important. It is a first novel and a prize novel — and it is written by a woman of twenty five.

The scene is laid in a Scandinavian settlement in the northern middle west; the theme is one that has been attempted time and again by various Norse-American writers. It has likewise been approached by Americans, such as Willa Cather and Bernice Brown. However, "Wild Geese" is the first authentic gallery of Scandinavians — from the Scandinavian point of view — to appear in English.

Caleb Gare is a prosperous farmer of Oeland, whose passion for the soil degenerates into greed and insanity. Amelia, Caleb's wife, is the mother of a neighboring "hired man", an architect farming for his health. The author has twisted this son into a mechanical device used by Caleb to establish himself as undisputed master of the Gare household. It is an artifice

which in no way jars the reader, though one feels it detracts from Miss Ostenson's art. However, it must be admitted that seldom has melodrama been used to better advantage. The course of events appears probable — even genuine.

"The Emigrants", by Johan Bojer, is a counterpart of Miss Ostenson's novel, extraneously a climax of the Norse-American immigrant literature. Bojer has attempted a parallel to "Growth of the Soil", and failed. His novel is a curious work, to be viewed from several angles. The first may be termed "hamsunesque". Bojer is no Hamsun, though it is reported that he has accorded Hamsun considerable amusement upon several occasions — one of which was the appearance of "The Emigrants".

Following the publication of "Growth of the Soil", the initiated expectantly awaited announcement of a Bojer epic. Just what would be the procedure this time? The Norse-American Centennial at hand, Bojer two years ago visited America. The opening of the Centennial marked also the publication of "Vor Egen Stamme" (The Emigrants). An enormous public greeted the book instantly.

The story concerns a handful of people who, transplanted to the American frontier, till the soil and establish a community. The subject matter offers unlimited possibilities. In fact, it knows no boundaries. The Old World and the New are involved: an international scene of enormous proportions. Bojer, as a capable dramatic story teller, accustomed to international scenes, should be especially equipped for the task of writing this particular novel. Yet he has failed. He has limited himself to the European point of view: he presents the spectacle of a disinterested Norwegian objec-

tively observing the American saga. The close association with the soil which establishes the genuine artistry of Hamsun's epic is sporadic, affected, and as a whole lost. Essentially, the theme meant nothing to the author, beyond the opportunity afforded to turn out a novel of exceptional interest. It is in no way part of Bojer's personality.

Bojer, as well as Miss Ostenso, has rescued a captivating theme from the morass of the Norse-American literature.

Wild Geese. By Martha Ostenso. Dodd, Mead and Company.

The Emigrants. By Johan Bojer. Translated by A. G. Jayne. The Century Company.