

Book Reviews

The Divided Heart, by Dorothy Burton Skardal (preface by Oscar Handlin). Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press. 1974 (published in Norway by Universitetsforlaget, Oslo). pp. 394, \$20.

The use of fiction as a source of history is always something of a problem. Only those scholars able to exercise caution, broad knowledge, and wisdom have proven themselves successful at the task. Dorothy Skardal uses a larger number of fictional works to assess the experience of Scandinavian immigrants in America. That she succeeds at all is remarkable and praiseworthy; that she occasionally fails to manipulate her sources and ideas in a meaningful fashion is not unexpected. Probably the most remarkable thing about this hefty and expensive volume (such are the economics of international publishing) is that it began a quarter of a century ago as a Harvard Ph.D. dissertation. The author survived several changes of intellectual fashion, not to mention her own emigration to Norway (she is a native of Omaha), to finally bring forth the published work.

The main theme is the immigrants' search for identity in a new world and a new culture. The title, "divided heart," was aptly chosen. The pain and permanent schizophrenia induced by casting off an old life and taking up a new existence on these shores was sometimes acute. This is a study of "culture shock"—a term which the author admits to learning only in recent years, long after she began to study and write about it.

Skardal makes a conscious effort to avoid the contamination of facts. The study is severely limited to a study of the literature produced by the first generations of immigrants. As she puts it, she wanted to write a social history of immigration "without the check of . . . conventional source materials" (p. 15). A casual reference is made in the last chapter to several standard studies of Scandinavian immigrant history, but in general, Skardal relies on her reading of novels, short stories, and poems published in the United States, mostly during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. To judge by her extensive citations and "selected"

bibliography, twenty-five years was none too long to wade through all of this literature. It is indeed a worthy effort, especially since the bulk of the literature came not from what in the nineteenth century would have been called the "better" class of writers. Most of the writing can be classed as popular fiction, or "minor" as Skardal calls it. In many cases the writers' motives for producing such ephemera were not commercial or artistic. Despite their lack of polished literary skills, immigrant writers felt compelled to express deeply-felt emotions. Thus, Skardal's claim that her book is a study of the inner feelings of Scandinavian immigrants is perhaps justified.

Immigrants of the three national groups included by Skardal—Norwegians, Swedes, and Danes—were prolific writers of ephemeral fiction. Most of the stories were written in the native language (although the question of what exactly was the native language was complicated in the case of Dano-Norwegian) and first saw the light of day in foreign language periodicals published in the United States. The output ranged in quality from the exquisite writing of O. Rolvaag to the scribbblings of a host of "amateurs" (especially clergymen) who supplied the insatiable need for copy of newspaper and magazine editors. Skardal might further describe her study as a look at *midwestern* immigrant literature, since most of the periodicals were based in the upper central farming states. Very few instances of urban immigrant experience find their way into the book. Students of Iowa history should be particularly interested in this study since so much of the literature was written by or about Iowans, and much of it was published in Iowa. Rolvaag's *Giants in the Earth* was first published in a literary supplement to the *Decorah Posten*.

The immigrant writers discussed and described almost every aspect of existence. Social life, religion, business, culture—all are found somewhere in the pages of immigrant fiction, usually viewed through the prism of a dual culture. The immigrant was never a whole person, at least in fiction, once he stepped off the boat. The literature is extremely problem-oriented, thrashing out the constant tension of alien existence. In the world of fiction even the simplest aspects of everyday life were fraught with the difficulty of strangerliness. Social customs, dress, language, business practices, and many other areas all came in for the anguished appraisal of the immigrant writers. Seldom were the newcomers de-

picted at ease with themselves and their new environment.

The relationship of the fictional immigrant experience and the historical reality—facts, figures, verifiable generalities—is never discussed by Skardal. In fact, one of the major deficiencies of the book is the failure to set the fictional world of the immigrant in any sort of historical context. As the author narrates the story lines of countless works of fiction, the real world is submerged. It is quite difficult to tell whether Skardal believes that the authors of short stories and novels were delivering a true bill. This failure to distinguish between fictional and historical voices is seductive and one of the major pitfalls of this sort of study. It would have been wiser to stand aside on occasion and comment on the meaning of literature as an expression of and commentary on actual experience.

Skardal has the unhappy habit of stating a rather simple idea—for example that economic success in America was a mixed blessing for immigrants since it tended to foster changes in traditional values (p. 187)—and then following with endless illustrations of examples of this idea in immigrant literature. Many paraphrased plots or character descriptions are brought to bear as a way of substantiating the original generalization. This technique is not necessarily a bad one, but in cases such as economic success, which may be verified by more suitable means, it leaves something to be desired. The practice of tracing every possible theme in the literature leads Skardal into some uncomfortable positions, such as her naive discussion of social mobility (Chapter 5). Careful selection of topics might have shortened the book and made its points more telling and incisive.

The best portions of the book are the discussions of the inner life of the immigrant. Past emotions are extremely difficult to study, except by literary methods, but Skardal is sensitive and skillful in delineating the soulful yearnings of the newcomers. The pain of adjustment, the irretrievable sense of loss, the rootlessness of the Scandinavians in America are made vivid through the use of literature.

In summary, the goods Skardal delivers are interesting and even moving as indicators of the inner life of Scandinavians. The oft-stated assumption that northern European Protestants were one of the more easily assimilated groups is already under critical scrutiny by other scholars, and this book will further that reap-

praisal. Its contribution to the general history of immigration is less, since it contains few surprises. The main function of the book is to intensify the expressions of pessimism and the bitter-sweet joining of cultures which were a part of the newcomers' baggage.

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Edgar Eugene Robinson and Vaughn Davis Bornet, *Herbert Hoover: President of the United States*. Hoover Institution Press. 1975. Illustrations. pp. xii, 398.

Professors Robinson and Bornet have produced an extremely readable book on the Herbert Hoover of the presidential years. It is comprehensive in its treatment of the Hoover presidential program, and of the limitations imposed on the president's powers during those years—especially the limitations imposed by divisions in American society in general and in the Republican Party in particular, which retarded Hoover's pre-Depression program and his efforts to confront the Depression once it began. Throughout, the material presented on the presidential years is well-researched and documented. Hoover's views on numerous issues and the explanations for his actions are clarified.

What is less well-researched and discussed in the book is the background to much that the authors describe in the presidential years. Hoover's difficulties with Senator Hiram Johnson are nowhere adequately explained, despite the fact that Hoover's challenge to Johnson for leadership of the Republican Party in California, beginning with 1920, has been described in the memoirs of the participants in the struggle and in several dissertations. Senator William E. Borah's lack of support for Hoover as his presidency wore on is less surprising when one considers the Hoover-Borah relationship over a longer period of time. Viewed in the longer perspective it is Borah's support of Hoover in the 1928 presidential election which emerges as the more surprising than his lack of support for Hoover once elected. There are other serious deficiencies, as well, in the authors' grasp of the develop-

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