

EMIGRATION AND LITERATURE: VILHELM MOBERG

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Vilhelm Moberg (1898–1973) was the first Swedish writer of fiction to take up the great migrations to North America during the 19th century as a literary theme. He was the son of a soldier-crofter under the old military system whereby Sweden supported its reserve army through each parish having the duty to provide a soldier by making available a croft on which he could work and support his family. The emigration was, so to speak, there in Moberg's background long before it became a source of literary inspiration to him. His home province – Småland in southern Sweden – consistently stood top of the league table of provinces that sent their sons and daughters out on the emigrant trail to a hoped-for better life. Throughout the period 1850–1930 Småland was dispatching an annual average of 4.6 emigrants per thousand inhabitants, and in the 1880s that figure peaked at about 11 per thousand. The only province to exceed it in both respects was Halland – the province that borders it to the south-west. And if this particular provincial background predisposed Moberg to take up the theme of emigration so equally did his family background. In an autobiographical article in 1957 he wrote: 'On the soldier croft where I was born and grew up they talked every day about the country where my parents' brothers and sisters lived. I remember the word **America** right from the earliest stage in my childhood when I first began to understand words.' On both maternal and paternal sides of his family almost all his aunts and uncles were in America, and in the same biographical anecdote he tells us: 'For a long time I thought that cousins were a sort of posh upper-class children only to be found in America.' He himself was due to join these transatlantic cousins as a 16 year old in 1914, but the remaining family at home – his mother in particular – pleaded with him to stay.

It has always surprised me – as, indeed, it surprised Moberg – that emigration is so notably absent as a theme in the Swedish literature of the latter part of the 19th century and the first half of the present century. I'll let Vilhelm Moberg speak again: 'Here we are dealing with what is quite simply the greatest event in modern Swedish history. It cost the country more people than all the wars it had ever fought...But this population loss of more than a million people was allowed less space in a Swedish history book than the battles of Lutzen and Narva...And literature has shown just as little interest in the emigration to America as history has...neither Heidenstam nor any other Swedish author found the topic worthy of an epic.'

Well, of course, the emigration found its epic portrayer in Moberg himself even if it was some decades after the age of mass migration was over. But his point is right. I would not have expected Verner von Heidenstam to lower his aristocratic nose far enough to see poor migrants but they might have been expected to figure in the works of the working-class school of writers that flourished in Sweden between 1910 and 1950. The main genre cultivated by the working-class writers was the autobiographical novel in which the central interest lay on the escape of particular individuals from the usually agricultural but sometimes industrial poverty in which they existed. In almost all of these novels that escape is to be achieved not only by leaving one's class and its manual labour but by achieving spiritual liberation by leaving one's home province and migrating – usually to Stockholm though just occasionally to the far dream of continental Europe. Of all of these writers Moberg is alone, as far as I can recall, in making significant reference to emigration to the United States. The poet Harry Martinson, incidentally also from a province of high migration, has California as a literary motif for very different reasons, and the northern novelist Eyvind Johnson tells a fairy tale of the failed migrants to Brazil but that too belongs in a different category.

This suggests to me that public perception of the process and scale of the emigration may not have been as widespread and deep as we now like to assume except in those districts most directly and strongly affected. Which also reinforces the point that emigration was a localised phenomenon, best viewed as a provincial, or even smaller – parish or family – matter. Thus it is not surprising that Moberg from his family and from Småland was highly conscious of the outflow of people, as was Martinson from Blekinge, but nor is it surprising that Ivar Lo-Johansson and Moa Martinson from Östergötland, Jan Fridegörd from Uppland and Rudolf Varnlund from Stockholm – all districts of low emigration – show neither awareness nor interest in it in their literary writings anyway.

Vilhelm Moberg's mammoth tetralogy of novels – *Utvandrarna* (The Emigrants), *Invandrarna* (The Immigrants), *Nybyggarna* (The Settlers) and *Sista brevet till Sverige* (Last Letter to Sweden), some 2,000 pages in all – appeared between 1949 and 1959. They quickly achieved great popularity, no doubt to some extent with the help of the so-called morality debate sparked off by the authentically peasant language they contain – and they have retained it. The first volume, the *Emigrants*, in particular, has been in print without a break since it first appeared and is continually coming out in popular editions, cheap editions, club editions and the like. They were filmed in two parts in the 1970s by Jan Troell, and they have all been translated into English – likewise in the 1970s. Moberg had first begun to work seriously on the emigration theme in the 1930s but the work was pushed aside by other more immediate concerns – the Second World War, when Moberg was actively involved in both the anti-Nazi and anti-censorship campaigns in Sweden as well as in writing *Rid i natt* (his contribution to the body of Swedish literature known as *beredskapslitteratur* ('the literature of preparedness')). He returned to serious researches on the emigration theme in

1947 and emigrated himself to the United States for a number of years from 1948. I shall return to this research and the documentary underpinnings of Moberg's novels in a moment.

The Emigrants tells the story of a group of sixteen people who emigrate from the parish of Ljuder in Småland in 1850 – a date that, of course, puts them among the earlier emigrants. Of the sixteen characters seven are of long term importance in the novel, but it is around two people in particular that the whole series is constructed: the crofter Karl Oskar Nilsson and his wife Kristina. This first volume of the series depicts the characters and their lives in their home environment in Småland, provides the various motivations behind their desire to emigrate, and describes the seventy day voyage from Karlshamn across the Atlantic to New York in the sailing brig *Charlotta*. Prime among the factors that impel the characters to emigrate is, of course, land. Småland is proverbially a harsh and stony province for the farmer and one in which the chances of making a good living from the land had been rendered almost hopeless by the endless subdivision of holdings by inheritance until the holdings were incapable of providing more than bare subsistence for a family even in a good year. And the middle of the 19th century had many more than its share of bad years. Karl Oskar's croft, for instance, is described as being 1/16 of a *manial* – *manial* being an old tax unit denoting a farm capable of supporting one extended farming family. But Moberg suggests a range of other factors as well as that of land: religious persecution of sectarian groups by the state church; the desire to escape the fetters of a rigidly stratified class-structure; the urge to become one's own man rather than a hired labourer condemned to conditions not much better than those of a serf; the wish on the part of the village whore to start a new life free from the scorn and derision she suffers at home; the dream of untold riches via the gold trail to California; even the urge to escape a shrewish wife.

In *The Immigrants* we follow the surviving migrants – one of the sixteen has died on the voyage along with eight other passengers aboard the *Charlotta* – as they continue their journey by rail and boat to Minnesota territory, an area that they have fixed on for no other reason than that a woman they meet on the voyage has a son there who claims to be doing well. Here, beside Chisago Lake in the St Croix valley some 50 miles north of present-day Minneapolis, Karl Oskar and his family stake their claim, initially in complete isolation but within a few years joined by other Swedish farmers. The rest of the series – and there is a lot of the rest – is the story of the hard work of settlement and of the difficulties of spiritual adaptation to the new environment that afflict Kristina in particular. But it is, for the most part, a story of success: the Nilsson family achieve a modest degree of affluence and Karl Oskar never doubts the rightness of his decision to emigrate; religious tolerance is found and, ironically, the only threat to it is the ingrained habits of the Swedes themselves; in further irony, Ulrika the village whore of Ljuder enjoys a long and respectable marriage to the Baptist pastor of St Cloud. History itself, however, cannot allow it all to be undramatic and Moberg includes the for-the-most-part distant tragedy of

the American Civil War and the very immediate dangers of the Sioux Uprising of 1862. Also, in the only part of the series in which Moberg deviates from naturalistic narrative, he uses a sequence of dream-like passages to depict the frightful experiences of Robert, Karl Oskar's younger brother, on the California trail. The overall timespan of the tetralogy is the lifetime of Karl Oskar Nilsson 1824–90; the effective timespan is the thirty years from his marriage to Kristina in 1844 to his handing over of his successful small farm in Minnesota to his son in 1874.

The Emigrant novels have not only been regarded as serious works of literature but as important contributions to the history of emigration as well. Moberg spent well over a decade writing the tetralogy and much of that time was spent researching in books, letters, diaries, interviews and personal visits to gather the material that was the basis of his work. When the Emigrant Institute opened in Vaxjo in 1968 he presented it with the Moberg collection of 110 printed books he had used as well as a large trunkful of other material of all kinds that he had collected. It included, for instance, his own correspondence with experts on specific topics he was following up. *The Emigrants* itself opens with a chapter entitled *The District They Left Behind*. Phrased as a report – its layout, incidentally, is very similar to the parish reports in the *Statistical Account for Scotland* – and subdivided under such headings as 'The Parish', 'Means of Subsistence', 'People in Authority', 'Other Inhabitants', 'Religious Aberrations' and so on, this chapter provides the facts behind the migration and Moberg then proceeds to personalise and dramatise them in the volume that follows. The following excerpts give the flavour of the report:

'On 1st January 1846 the parish of Ljuder had 1925 inhabitants, whereof 998 were male and 927 were female. The population had very nearly trebled since 1750...According to the land-tax-roll Ljuder has 43 full holdings which in 1759 were shared between 87 owners. By 1846, because of land division caused by inheritance, the number of holdings had increased to 254, threequarters of them being 1/8 of a mantal or less...Apart from the 254 farmers and crofters who owned or shared taxable land, there were 39 people entered as tradesmen and journeymen, 92 as squatters, 11 enlisted soldiers, 6 licensees and publicans, 5 horse-traders and 3 pedlars. Further listed as resident in the parish were 274 farm-servants, 32 poorhouse servants, 104 ordinary paupers, 18 decrepit and feeble, 11 deaf and dumb, 8 blind, 6 weak-sighted, 13 severely malformed, 4 lame, 5 mentally deficient, 3 idiots, 1 semi-idiot, 3 whores and 2 thieves.'

And so it goes on with factual information on sundry other matters, including religious problems, drink, crops and the like. In the same sort of vein at the end of the final volume *Last Letter to Sweden* Moberg takes the unusual course for a novelist of appending a select bibliography of the fifty or so works that he had found most useful in the course of his composition. Furthermore, at not infrequent points of the narrative itself he includes quotations, direct or free, from a variety of written and oral secondary sources. Robert, for instance, Karl Oskar's brother, has a secret

personal bible that he keeps hidden in the straw at home in Sweden – only reading selected passages to his closest friends: its title is *A Description of the United States of North America*. It is an authentic book and its subtitle, which Moberg does not actually include, states that it contains ‘Particular information and advice to those who wish to emigrate there; author Johan Bolin, curate of the parish of Sjosas in the diocese of Växjö 1853’.

What all these things do is to thoroughly convince Moberg’s audience of the factual truth of the novels and the veracity and knowledge of the author – why else should he include so many statistics, most of which are irrelevant to the characters that we meet? Why else should he include a book-list of titles that few readers would either be able to follow up or feel the need to do so? The answer of course is that these things are literary devices placed in the text precisely for the purpose of convincing us of the veracity of it all, and they do so very effectively. So effectively that most readers and many critics have spoken of Moberg’s novels as if they were works of factual history. They are not, and Vilhelm Moberg himself on many occasions was careful to say that they are not. With regard to the documentary features I have referred to, for instance, it has been shown that the statistics for the parish of Ljuder are not a genuine document but a conflation of sources; the description of the United States that Robert is described as reading in 1848–49 did not appear until 1853; a more extreme example of the sort of anachronism has Robert quoting in 1850 from an English language manual for emigrants that did not appear until the 1920s.

It would be possible to offer many other deviations from strict historical veracity; it would equally be possible to provide many instances where Moberg remains faithful to historical truth. When he deviated it was clearly not because he did not know the facts – at the time of writing he probably had a more thorough knowledge than anyone else alive. So his deviations are a conscious choice made for literary purposes. He was a novelist and not an historian, and that was something that he reiterated time after time. He wrote:

‘The reader should believe in the probability of the account. But this has nothing to do with a demand for historical exactitude. I draw a clearly defined line between history and historical fiction: history deals with what *has* happened, the novel deals with what *could* have happened.’

When reviewers in the press referred to his work as history he went so far as to write to the editor and point out the distinction I have just mentioned. At the end of the final volume *Last Letter to Sweden* – along with his bibliography – he includes a note to the effect that what he has written are novels and that the scholarly history of the emigration still awaits its writer. On the whole, later historians have paid tribute to Moberg’s account of the spiritual truth of the process of migration. One might also wish that some of the later practitioners of documentary drama and fiction recognised these distinctions as clearly as Moberg did.

There is, however, one area in which Moberg did come under strong attack from an expert and that was in the matter of the mixed Swedish-American language he put into the mouths of his characters as the series progresses and as their time in America becomes longer. I suspect that the passages in which he does this – and they are frequent – must cause quite a few difficulties to any Swedish reader with a less than fluent command of English. His reason for such passages is, as with other fields I have noted, to achieve the greatest possible degree of verisimilitude. No less a figure than Einar Haugen, however, basing his criticisms on his researches into Norwegian-American, attacked Moberg in vehement terms. The language, wrote Haugen, is ‘a hotchpotch of improbabilities...a free construction based on insufficient observation of and understanding for the milieu he is trying to describe.’ The strength of Haugen’s attack is strange in that he himself had written elsewhere that ‘it is quite impossible to predict with any confidence that a given word cannot be borrowed’. Haugen has, in any case, missed the point: with the pedantry of the academic he notes that Moberg has at times constructed forms that have never been collected and that he makes copying errors when quoting from contemporary Swedish-American sources such as diaries and letters. True in both cases – but irrelevant to the task of the novelist. It also ignores the fact that most of Moberg’s strange-looking constructions can be found in Swedish-American sources – and, where the particular example cannot be found, the type of construction can be. It gives me pleasure to find for Moberg!

I shall finish by quoting an old American ditty:

Where once in freedom on the plains
Roamed Indian and scout,
The Swede with whisky-sodden breath
Now plants potatoes out.

If you want to find out how it felt to be that Swede, go to Vilhelm Moberg.

Some Books

Moberg’s tetralogy has appeared in English as follows: *The Emigrants* (1971), *Unto a Good Land* (1971), *The Settlers* (1978) and *Last Letter Home* (1978), translated by Gustaf Lannestock, published in New York by Fawcett Popular Library. The definitive work in Swedish on the series, which includes a careful assessment of its use of historical and documentary sources, is: Gunnar Eidevall, *Vilhelm Mobergs emigrantepos* (Stockholm, Norstedts, 1974). An excellent introduction in English to all Moberg’s work is: P.A. Holmes, *Vilhelm Moberg* (New York, Twayne, 1980).