

FROM JANTE TO UTOPIA?

Aksel Sandemose and the Fascination of North America

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An Emigrant Author

In 1916, during the night of 29th October, the 17-year-old Danish seaman *Axel Nielsen* fled the schooner *Katrine*. This happened in Fogo Harbour in the northern part of Newfoundland. Nielsen spent the following winter as a lumberjack in the interior of the province, but in January 1917 he left the island on board another ship, bound for Europe.

What traumas the young Dane experienced during the cold Canadian winter have remained a mystery, but a mystery which Axel Nielsen – or *Aksel Sandemose* as he called himself from 1921 onwards – circled for the rest of his life. Until his dying day he claimed that he had killed someone in the Newfoundland forests. This did not, however, prevent Sandemose from developing a life-long fascination for North America. He spent three periods of his life in Canada: the winter of 1916–17 as mentioned; the time from late summer 1927 to early spring 1928; and the spring and summer of 1938. Throughout his life, Sandemose was tempted by the idea of emigrating across the Atlantic to the Utopia of North America.

Sandemose was born in 1899 in *Nykøping Mors* in north-west Jutland, off the Danish mainland. The small provincial town was situated on the island of Mors in the Limfjord, far from the urbanity of Copenhagen. A renamed version of *Nykøping Mors*, *Jante*, appears in several of Sandemose's novels. The parochial and conformist mentality of Jante was highlighted by Jante in his controversial, so-called Jante Law. The ten commandments of the Jante Law are:

1. *Don't get the impression that you are anything at all.*
2. *Don't think you are superior to us.*
3. *Don't think you are brighter than us.*
4. *Don't think you are better than we are.*
5. *Don't think you know more than we do.*
6. *Don't think you are more than we are.*
7. *Don't imagine you are good at anything at all.*

8. *Don't laugh at us.*
9. *Don't think anybody cares for you.*
10. *Don't think you can teach us anything.*¹

This was the mentality of which Sandemose spent most of his life and most of his writing career ridding himself. His life can be seen as a flight from the close air of Jante and a search for an alternative social climate, whether that was to be found elsewhere in Scandinavia or across the Atlantic. Likewise, in Sandemose's literary works the poetic conflict is typically between the ever-present spirit of Jante and the never-lasting encounters with a social and psychological otherness.

Aksel Sandemose made his literary debut in Denmark in 1923 with a collection of short stories called *Fortaellinger fra Labrador* (Stories from Labrador). The prominent Danish author Johannes V. Jensen, who was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1944, had recommended Sandemose's stories to the Copenhagen publishing house *Gylendal*. Sandemose maintained Jensen as one of his literary role models throughout his career. Both men shared a fascination with the transatlantic West, which they – like millions of emigrants from the Scandinavian countries – considered the land of freedom, enterprise and far-reaching individualism. It was a land where conventions and prejudices did not exist. Jensen and Sandemose also shared a strong, not to say fascinated, rejection of the exotic and passionate South, in their works often represented by Spain, Portugal or, in Jensen's case, the Far East. The result is a loaded contrast between the cool, controlled, masculine North and the hot, sensual and feminine South.

In 1930, Sandemose emigrated north to Norway, his mother's native country (his father was Danish, an unskilled labourer who in later life became a factory manager). Sandemose changed language as well as country: from day one in Norway he wrote in Norwegian, and as the years went by his written Norwegian freed itself more and more from Danish influence. Moreover, it could be argued that he, with his change of country and language, also succeeded in altering his literary style and becoming more independent of his role models such as Johannes V. Jensen. Sandemose made his debut as a Norwegian author – an immigrant author, as it were – in 1931 with the novel *En sjømann går i land* (*A Sailor Goes Ashore*). In this novel the reader for the first time encountered the character of Espen Arnakke, who was to become a recurring figure in the novels of Sandemose – the *alter ego* of the author, or rather one among several of his literary egos. We shall return to Espen Arnakke and his Canadian experiences shortly.

Sandemose fled Denmark, and what he experienced as its claustrophobia, for Norway. Some ten years later, in 1941, he had to flee occupied Norway for neutral Sweden, this time for political reasons. For four years Sandemose was in exile in Sweden, mainly in Stockholm. Here he went on publishing, now in Swedish (he did not write Swedish himself, though, but had his scripts translated from Norwegian).

With the liberation in 1945, Sandemose returned to Norway, his chosen Scandinavian country.

Today, Aksel Sandemose's fame is growing as a highly original and experimental novelist whose best works are loaded with tensions – between masculine and feminine values, between hedonism and a painful death wish, between the Christian ideas of guilt and suffering *and* an almost megalomaniac demand for self-fulfilment and for revenge, when the vulnerable ego is under attack. Likewise, while Sandemose was highly critical of a formal, conformist collectivity like that in Jante, he had at the same time a lifelong flirtation with socialism and communism.

On the one hand, Sandemose was to an eminent degree a Scandinavian writer. He lived and worked for fairly long periods in three Scandinavian countries and published first editions of his works in three Scandinavian languages. On the other hand, like so many of his fellow Scandinavians who decided to leave their homelands, Sandemose was highly attracted to the New World on the other side of the North Atlantic. In the second half of this article I shall be discussing the images of North America presented in Sandemose's Norwegian debut novel *En sjømann går i land*. What characterizes the literary picture Sandemose presents of a Scandinavian immigrant community? Is it a Utopian alternative to the town of Jante which Sandemose so detested, or is the emigrant community rather a mirror image of Jante?

A Sailor Goes Ashore

Between 1928 and 1939 Aksel Sandemose wrote a trilogy of novels about a community of Danish settlers, *Beaver Coulee*, in the West Canadian province of Alberta. The trilogy consists of the Danish novel *Ross Dane* (1928) and the Norwegian novels *En sjømann går i land* and *September* (1939). *Ross Dane* takes place in the early part of this century and describes the creation and growth of the settlement. *September* takes place in 1939 and describes the moral downfall of the settlement. The middle novel, which is to be the topic of the following, takes place in the late 1920s during the early years of the Depression and introduces the character of Espen Arnakke into Beaver Coulee. In this novel, Sandemose took his own youthful experiences in Newfoundland, in mildly disguised form, as the point of departure.

Like Axel Nielsen in October 1916, Espen Arnakke in *En sjømann går i land* deserts from a Danish ship which runs between Canada and Europe. Espen swims ashore in the open sea off the east coast of Newfoundland and reaches land at *Deadman's Point*. He finds work in a fishing community named, equally ominously, *Misery Harbor*. While Misery Harbor is described as a distinctly unwelcoming place where 'the blind eyes of the windows' don't appear to notice the newcomer, Espen nevertheless feels at home in the desolate surroundings. Only up to a point, however. Espen and his great rival in this dank world of misery, Big John Wakefield, both come to desire the same girl, the sisterly and chaste Eva. One night Espen overhears how Big John

brutally seduces the beloved Eva, and Espen responds to his own and Eva's humiliation by killing his rival and tyrant. It is an act of passion and revenge. Now Espen has become a murderer and even more of a fugitive than he was before. His flight and search westwards must continue.

Espen manages to negotiate his way onto the Canadian mainland and one day he arrives at Beaver Coulee in Alberta, having learned about the immigrant settlement. The reception he gets there is about as welcoming as the one he got in Nisery Harbor. Nevertheless, Espen is offered a job as a farmhand by *Sten Eriksen*, an educated farmer who originates from the Copenhagen upper middle classes. Soon after they have started working together, Sten Eriksen makes a significant statement to Espen about the social climate of the immigrant communities in North America. It is Sten Eriksen's view that 'it is the environment's slaves who have escaped over here, and the formalism of that environment is far stricter than the one they fled. Free thought is banned in America, including Canada! Here the little ones and the prejudiced ones have formed a society, and freedom to *them* is the fact that they are all alike.' It is hard not to recognise Sandemose's own voice behind that of Eriksen in this statement; but do the events and descriptions of the novel itself confirm Sten's verdict?

The answer to this question is, I believe, yes and no! *Yes*, in so far as the immigrant settlement is described as a puritanical and narrow society full of gossip and mutual monitoring. On several occasions, Espen Arnakke – the suspicious newcomer with a secret murder on his conscience – challenges the spirit of this society, for example when he attends his first service in the local church and hums the Internationale during the sermon. Moreover, when Espen allows himself to be seduced in a ripe corn field by Kristine, the daughter of one of the influential farmers in the settlement, and thereafter abandons the frighteningly powerful woman, he is explicitly defined as a 'Devil's child'. The fact that he suffers from an eye disease which now and again renders him almost blind is seen as yet another proof of his devilish nature. Thus, Espen in the early days of his stay at Beaver Coulee is marginalised by the community as a man of evil.

Furthermore, Espen is not the only victim of the narrow-mindedness of Beaver Coulee. Thus, when the agricultural crisis strikes and particularly when the so-called wheat pool breaks down, the above-mentioned farmer, Sten Eriksen, is singled out as the scapegoat because he has publicly expressed over-optimistic views on the financial prospects of the settlement. At the same time, Sten's wife, Maja, is stigmatised as a sinful witch resulting in a veritable Ku Klux Klan-style hunt for the couple.

The answer to the above question, however, is also *no*. Beaver Coulee is not just governed by religiously inspired uniformity. The presence of the Eriksens and of Espen himself in the settlement is in a sense a denial of the claim. Moreover, the immigrant community as Sandemose portrays it can boast a truly impressive selection of human origins, shapes and colours: giant women, animal-like men, Danish des-

perados, Dutch socialists, East European 'Galicians', Indian 'half-breeds', etc. Beaver Coulee is a true melting-pot and gradually even the mysterious Espen Arnakke with his dark past becomes integrated into the community and adapts to the paradoxical and hugely impressive Canadian nature with 'icebergs in the middle of summer'. Towards the end of the novel Espen buys his own land and thus becomes a real settler. He also gets engaged to Gjatrid, Katrine's younger and much more virgin-like sister. Espen decides that 'he would never go east again'. To him the wild west remains a fascination.

In his article 'Aksel Sandemose and Canadian Prairie Fiction'², the Danish expert on Canadian literature Jørn Carlsen asks whether Aksel Sandemose's Canada trilogy should be read as a prairie romance or as prairie realism and concludes, 'I would regard him [Aksel Sandemose] as belonging to the tradition of Canadian Prairie Realism'. I would, however, finally argue that *En sjømann går i land* can be read as a prairie romance as well as a piece of prairie realism. The novel is undoubtedly a social-psychological account of a Nordic emigrant community which is gradually being caught and shattered by the Canadian agricultural crisis of the late 1920s. But the novel is also a romantic fairytale about a hero, Espen Arnakke, who overcomes countless obstacles and finally gains half the kingdom plus the princess. Read along these lines, the novel's portrayal of Canada remains a portrayal of a magical country and North America retains its fascination. Beaver Coulee is not yet another let-down for Espen Arnakke; on the contrary, here he finds his permanent place on earth. The settlement may not be a veritable Utopia but nevertheless it is a far cry from the claustrophobic Jante.

NOTES

1. Quoted from, Jørn Carlsen, 'Aksel Sandemose and Canadian Prairie Fiction', in K. Gross and W. Klass (edd.), *English Literature of the Dominions* (Verlag Königshausen und Neumann, 1981).

2. *Ibid.*

ADDITIONAL BIBLIOGRAPHY

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A. Sandemose, *En sjømann går i land* (Oslo, 1931).

A. Sandemose, *Fortaellinger fra Labrador* (Copenhagen, 1923).