

# THE NORWEGIAN LANDSCAPE AND LITERATURE

By Professor W. Werenskiold, in the "Geographical Magazine"

"A neutral is a country which both sides fight," says the modern definition. But her uncomfortable position between greater nations at war, directly connected by trade with both, unable to trade with one without offending the other, has not been Norway's only difficulty. From a military point of view, Norway is extremely vulnerable. The Norsemen themselves point to three-quarters of their country as useless: bare rock, scoured of its riches by the glacial action of long, cold ages in the northern latitudes. There is no population in the barren uplands to resist an invader, and many hundreds of miles of fiord-broken coastline along which an invader can land his forces.

If these conditions are disadvantages in time of war, then in time of peace they are advantages. For Norway is a beautiful country, with the same barren beauty of grandeur that New Zealanders grow to know and love in the South Island alpine country. It makes life hard for a people who must ever be striving to make the most of scant resources, but it breeds hardy people, and there has been something about the light and atmosphere of the northern climate that has made great men of literature out of succeeding generations of the Norwegians; some realists, some dreamers, all with a touch of the clear-seeing mysticism that comes from living in the land of the midnight sun.

The Norwegian scene, and its relation to Norwegian letters, are discussed in this article from the *Geographical Magazine*, by Professor W. Werenskiold, Professor of Geology at Norway's one university, at Oslo, where a young New Zealander, Brian Mason, was last heard of lecturing in Geology.

AS civilisation advances and mankind multiplies, the surface of the globe is being completely altered, to the regret of all unpractical lovers of romantic Nature. But the process is, it seems, inevitable.

Such is the course of events in fertile and densely populated countries. But in Norway, the war against Nature has not proceeded so far; here it is still possible to escape from the noise and throng of modern life, to silent woods, open seashores, and wide highlands, without meeting too many other seekers after loneliness. And in Norway it does not take long to get into the wild, open country.

Norway has only lately entered upon the path of industrialisation, and development has not as yet proceeded very far. As a matter of fact, the country might be considered one of the most useless in the world. It is situated far towards the north, and filled with lofty mountains. For the present only about a fortieth part of the area is being tilled, about a quarter is covered by forest, and the remainder consists of mountain pastures, rocky wastes, Alpine peaks, and glaciers. We have still enough of primitive Nature, but during the last thirty or forty years very rapid industrialisation has set in, with corresponding changes in daily life and scenery. Mountain lakes have been dammed, famous waterfalls have disappeared, old-fashioned farms and quiet villages have been turned into smoky, noisy industrial centres. The small towns with their cosy, white-painted houses and small gardens, are afflicted with the spiritless uniformity of modern times. In short, the old, idyllic times are past; the hard, modern matter-of-fact progress goes on, irresistibly. More people can live in the land, and live better, too; but much of the spirit of the land is lost.

*The valley, the parish lies, its legends forgotten,*

*Full of people, paper, lumber,  
And no aimless stroller wanders,*

*Dreaming, hunting, making verses. . . .*  
Herman Wildenvey (b. 1886)

Norway has been compared to an immense block of rock, with a more or less even surface, highest towards the west, but sloping gradually towards the south and east. Upon this plateau are set clusters of rounded hills and Alpine peaks; into the block



BJORNSTJERNE BJORNSON

valleys are carved out, long and open to the east of the divide, but to the west, deep, short, steep and partly submerged in fjords. The huge "over-deepening" of the valleys is due to the action of the glaciers of the Great Ice Age. The glaciation is responsible, not only for the deep valleys between steep rock walls, but also for the formation of lakes and waterfalls—in short, all scenery that is considered grand and glorious by present-day tourists, though in former days it was regarded as horrible and repulsive. But the glaciers also scraped off and carried away the soil—great parts of Denmark, Northern Germany, and even England, are covered by gravel and earth from Norway, which was left with very little arable land indeed.

## Striking Contrasts

Thus the scenery of Norway, for the most part still wild and romantic, presents many striking con-

trasts, especially to the traveller proceeding from west to east; and these contrasts of landscape are intimately associated with the different literary characteristics of the various writers of whom her soil, otherwise so barren, has proved remarkably prolific.

From the western coasts long narrow fjords penetrate into the high land. This is the land of the tourist, with glittering snowfields on the lofty mountains, silent lakes, roaring waterfalls, glaciers reaching almost to the sea—but also with forests and fine green verdure where some soil has remained on the steep slopes. On a smiling summer day nothing can be more beautiful, and in the early part of the summer, when thousands of cherries, apples, and plums are in blossom, it is an almost unearthly sight. But on a rainy day in the late autumn, when the clouds hang like a roof between steep walls, one may feel as in a prison.

In such surroundings Bjornstjerne Bjornson (1832-1910) spent much of his youth.

Bjornson's works, his tales, his novels, plays, and first and last his songs, are wrought on this background: the scenery of his native land, from the seashore to the innermost valley. His most famous poem, our national anthem, begins with the words:

*Yes, we love this land of ours, rising from the sea. . . .*

## The Tales of Knut Hamsun

Knut Hamsun (b. 1859) was also born in one of the mountain valleys. When he was still a young boy the family moved to one of the wildest parts of the Nordland coast, where the Alpine peaks rise directly from the seashore. The social conditions were somewhat peculiar; the aristocracy was represented by the merchants, each of them the "king" of a village of poverty-stricken fishermen and small farmers, all of whom he had on his "books" as debtors. Sometimes "Finns" or (more correctly) Lapps came down from the mountains, queer little folk in gaudy clothes. Against this singular background the author works out his marvellous tales. There are hard-working men with set purpose in his gallery of persons, men who go out in the wilderness, clearing the land and tilling the soil. But he often presents the opposite type: the man of intellectual gifts, absolutely free from any taint of energy.

## Ibsen and "Peer Gynt"

Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) spent his youth in some of the small, sleepy towns on the south-east coast of Norway, in a rather tame part of the land, where everything is on a small scale, but attractive for all that. The little dull seashore township, with its respectable and narrow-minded townspeople, forms the background for several of his plays.

As a young man he made a journey on foot through the highlands, and his open mind received an overwhelming impression of this country, unknown to him till that date. Some of the most characteristic scenes in his strange, fantastic poetical play, *Peer Gynt*, are located in the saeter region. The wild girls, the reindeer-hunter, even the "troll" could only be found here. And when the fanatical preacher and idealist, Brand, leads his congregation up into the snowfields, it is a remembrance from Ibsen's first sight of the great Jostedal glacier. His last drama, *When We Dead Awaken*, closes also among the lifeless rocks of the high hills of Norway.

## From Town to Mountain

The father of Sigrid Undset (b. 1882) was a talented man, an archaeologist of note and a most promising scholar, but he died young, leaving his

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