



Rølvaag and Krause
Two Novelists of the Northwest Prairie Frontier

I

THE STORY of the settlement of the northwestern prairie states in America has been told most powerfully and successfully by Ole E. Rølvaag, the Norwegian-American author of *Giants in the Earth* and six other novels about the immigrant experience on the frontier. While novelists like Herbert Krause—often labelled as Rølvaag's successor—might win literary prizes and earn a degree of popularity, Rølvaag was the only novelist among the Scandinavians and the Germans in the region to gain a significant measure of success with the American public. He had the good fortune to be brilliantly translated and to have chosen as grand a theme as that of any epic or saga: the struggle of a tenacious and daring pioneer to found his own kingdom in the wilderness. Moreover, although the Norwegians made up a relatively small proportion of the North Europeans who came to the prairies, in Rølvaag they had a spokesman who not only depicted the part that his own group had played in the land-taking but so lifted the adventure to the level of the universal that it described in large measure the experience of millions of other immigrants and Americans who in the second half of the nineteenth century pushed the farming frontier westward from Illinois and Wisconsin into Iowa, Minnesota, and Dakota Territory.

It can be argued that the Norwegian immigrants were as representative of this northern farming frontier as any national group, including the more numerous Germans and Swedes, in that more of them turned to agriculture than did immigrants from other countries and in that eighty percent of the 800,000 Norwegians who eventually came to America were concentrated in the six-state area from Illinois to the Dakotas. They established themselves in a series of flourishing settlements: along the Fox River southwest of Chicago in the early 1830s, at Muskego and Koshkonong in Wisconsin in 1840, and along the Mississippi and into Iowa and Minnesota in the years that followed. As these settlements grew and prospered, burgeoning with churches and schools and helping to attract more and more Norse immigrants, they served increasingly as "halfway houses" where newcomers could pause for a while—to learn the English language and American ways of doing things

and to equip themselves, as often happened, for land-taking farther west. Rølvaag's characters Per Hansa and Beret spent some years in Minnesota, for example, before launching out into the great desolation of Dakota Territory. But no amount of acclimatizing could eliminate the terrible cost of pioneering paid by many in homesickness, mental illness, and disease, especially on the prairie frontier, for which few immigrants could be fully prepared.

The settlements were also the centers for a lively Norwegian-American intellectual life. From the mid-nineteenth century on, more than eight hundred newspapers sprang up, written in Norwegian and directed to "Det norske Amerika," Norwegian America. The greater number had a brief life span, as was true of most foreign-language papers, and even the longest-lived had a very limited circulation. Yet they represented the immigrant's desire to keep abreast of events in the Old World and the New, and they served more practical purposes as well. In their pages were printed poems, stories, essays, and—later on—serialized novels, oftentimes about pioneering and thus useful to those contemplating a move westward. From the 1870s until Rølvaag's time over a hundred novels appeared in newspapers and as separate publications, many of them marked by realistic attention to detail regarding life in America, particularly in relation to the pioneering experience.

Rølvaag thus had a surprising number of Norwegian-American predecessors who wrote novels in their native language about America, even though only a little of what was written had an impact outside Det norske Amerika. The same lack of impact was generally true among the other Scandinavians who wrote. Few readers of any one national group, as a matter of fact, were even aware of the leading writers in the other groups; and American readers knew virtually nothing of any of them. Among the earliest of the Norwegian-American novelists to write realistically about the immigrant experience in the West were Nicolai Severin Hassel and Tellef Grundysen. In 1874 Hassel published a long narrative set in Minnesota, entitled *Alf Brage*, and followed it with a sequel about the 1862 Indian uprising in Minnesota, *Days of Terror*. Grundysen's *From Both Sides of the Sea* (1877), set partly in Norway and partly in America, is notable for the stark realism of its picture of immigrant life in southern Minnesota. Others who contributed novels about the western experience were Hjalmar Hjorth Boyesen, whose 1879 novel *Falconberg* (in English) first presented Norwegian immigrant life to American readers, and H. A. Foss, author of the phenomenally successful *The Cotter Boy* (1889). Foss's best frontier novel is *Valborg* (1927), an account of a journey from Wisconsin into the Red River

valley of North Dakota. *The Cotter Boy* stimulated Peer Olson Strømme to write an artistically superior novel of settlement life in Wisconsin (*Halvor: A Story of Pioneer Life*). First printed in 1892 as a serial in Strømme's own newspaper *Superior Posten*, *Halvor* increased circulation for that paper just as Foss's novel had done for *Decorah-Posten*. In 1906 Strømme published a sequel, *Young Helgeson*, a realistic and sometimes comic story of Norwegian pioneer life along the Red River.

In the twentieth century, although Waldemar Ager, author of *Christ Before Pilate* (1910), could be said to have earned the second-highest place artistically among Norwegian-language novelists (behind Rølvaag), the best novels of the pioneering experience were written by Ole A. Buslett, in such psychological works as *The Road to the Golden Gate* (1916); by Simon Johnson, in *From Fjord to Prairie* (1914) and *The Home of Freedom* (1925); and by Johannes B. Wist, in the trilogy *Immigrant Scenes* (1920), *The Home on the Prairie* (1921) and *Jonasville* (1922). The most successful and prolific of the Norwegian-American novelists since Rølvaag has been Martha Ostenso, who emigrated from near Bergen at an early age. Unlike nearly all of her predecessors and unlike Rølvaag himself, she wrote her popular novels of prairie farm life in English. Although rural settings play an important part in most of them, beginning with *Wild Geese* (1925), and while Norwegian immigrants and their descendants appear occasionally as characters, as in *The Mandrake Root* (1938), and *O River, Remember!* (1943), there is little about immigrant pioneering, and the farm background of most of the works is subordinated to plot. Other recent writers of Scandinavian-American origin have given more attention to their own people. The most notable farm novelist among them has been Sophus Keith Winther. His trilogy about Danish immigrants in Nebraska (1936–1938), also written in English, comes much closer to Rølvaag in its depth of understanding and in its conclusion that the cost of immigration to those who came has been greater than its benefits. But Winther, like his contemporary, Herbert Krause, is a novelist of transition in the literary tradition of immigrants writing about the West. His trilogy chronicles the last phases of settlement life and the struggle of the second and third generations to escape their narrowly ethnic backgrounds and become assimilated Americans.

The man who was to bring the Scandinavian immigrant experience to world prominence, Ole Edvart Rølvaag, was born on April 22, 1876 on an island off the Helgeland coast of Norway close to the Arctic Circle. The spectacular scenery of that northern land—the mountains, the barren islands, the perpetually changing sea, and the extravagant colors of summer—contributed its share to the peculiar blend of the romantic and the

realistic in his character and in his novels. The second son in a family of eight children, Rølvaag early had literary ambitions even though he felt himself always to be inferior in intellect to his older brother, Johan. As a child Rølvaag wanted to be a writer of songs, and when he was only ten he started a novel, writing out as many as five pages in longhand before destroying them in a quarrel with Johan.

While he was still in school on Dønna Island, Rølvaag first contracted "America fever" by reading a Norwegian translation of James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*. The serious decision to emigrate, however, was made later, when he was sixteen, after a particularly severe storm at sea destroyed the fishing fleet he had joined. The shock of watching many of his friends die was a strong motivating factor in Rølvaag's decision, and soon after he wrote to his uncle Jakob Jakobsen at Elk Point, South Dakota, asking to borrow the money to go to America. But when the ticket finally arrived three years later, he found himself faced with the most difficult decision of his life: his boss Kristian Andersen offered to make him the skipper of a fine fishing boat, with the chance to own it outright in a year—if only he would remain in Norway. Rølvaag was stunned at the prospect and asked time to consider what to do. But despite the fact that he had no reasonable excuse for turning down Andersen's proposal, he finally responded that he was leaving for America, his land of promise. In the first entries of his diary he wrote: "I'm going out into the world, to seek my fortune and happiness. . . . Some day, I believe, I shall reach the goal, far, far beyond the high mountains."

The romantic yearnings expressed so frequently in the diary and in the letters that make up *The Third Life of Per Smevik* (*Amerika-Breve*, 1912), Rølvaag's autobiographical novel, quickly came up against the hard realities of life in what Wallace Stegner has called the Homestead West. Although the pioneering phase in South Dakota had been over for many years, with clapboard houses and barns now replacing the dugouts and soddies of the first-comers, Rølvaag found labor on Sivert Eidem's farm terribly strenuous, especially for a newly arrived immigrant like himself. If on occasion his seaman's skills gave him a momentary advantage over his fellow laborers—as when he rescued a haying operation with a timely splice on a severed rope—for the first months he ran an almost desperate race to keep up with his uncle and the other workers. "America may be the promised land," he had Per Smevik say, "but it will be some time before I admit it. And if it continues to be as hard on me as it has been up to now, I'll never live long enough to admit it either." By contrast, Rølvaag wrote to his brother, people in Norway don't work; they only putter. The great majority of the

people there have no understanding of the true value of “really economical intensive work.”

From the very beginning of his life in America Rølvaag was aware of the great gap that existed between life in the new country and that in Norway, and almost immediately he determined to seek ways in which the heritage of Norwegians in America could be preserved, as he believed, to the greater strengthening of the new fatherland. When he arrived in 1896 he was already a mature man, deeply imbued with a sense of his own culture and toughened in body and mind by the hard life of a Nordland fisherman. His love of the ballads and legends of his childhood and his later reading in classic Norwegian literature had already stimulated in him an almost passionate commitment to things Norse. He had come, moreover, during a period when his own people, after two generations in America, had developed a sense of their cultural identity as Norwegian-Americans. At the same time he was acutely aware of both the cost of emigration and the advantages. Among the gains, as Per Smevik recorded them, were prosperity, magnificent farms and beautifully kept houses, and with prosperity the development among the immigrant farmers of a new ability to farm and live efficiently, to make the best use of time and productive power. Added to these were the possibility of personal growth, the result of mingling with people of other cultures, and a new freedom—civil, religious, and economic—more abundant than that to be found anywhere else in the world. There had also been losses: the “mighty and magnificent nature” of Norway, with its power to uplift the soul; the love of beauty and the cleanliness so characteristic of the Norwegians; and the spiritual strength that comes from living with one’s own people.

After two years on the Eidem farm, Rølvaag enrolled in the secondary department of Augustana College at Canton, South Dakota. His primary purpose was to learn English, but almost immediately he discovered the joys of studying in a warm and supportive atmosphere and decided that it was the wisest move he could have made. “How glorious it is to mingle with a hundred students!” he wrote in his diary. “That alone develops and sharpens one’s mind. A young man, surrounded by a hundred companions, will naturally try to be the best one.” During the summers for the next three years he travelled about the West as a harvest hand and seller of books and stereopticons. The diary and his first novel record his close observations of the life of the inhabitants of the midlands, rural folk mostly, and most of them Norwegian. Again and again (in *The Third Life of Per Smevik*) he sets down his disappointment at the lack of ideals among them, at their total commitment to hogs and cattle. And yet Rølvaag’s lively classmates at Augustana were the teen-age sons and daughters of these same money-grubbing farmers. This was another disparity in America, between the ideals of youth

and the achievement of maturity, one that would also fascinate him and that he would probe in his prairie novels.

Among the many friends whom Rølvaag made at Augustana was Jennie Marie Berdahl, the third daughter of a pioneering family from northeast of Sioux Falls and the girl he would later marry. It was Rølvaag's good fortune to become acquainted with this family, because over the next several years he would hear from Jennie's father and uncles countless details about pioneer life on the sod-house frontier, details of events and persons that would make their way into *Giants in the Earth* and the second and third novels of the Beret Holm trilogy. It was the adventure of their settlement that especially attracted Rølvaag, for his romantic soul was drawn to the greatness of their achievement. But it would be a quarter of a century before he would turn that material into novel form in the work that would be his masterpiece.

In the meantime, following graduation from Augustana in 1901, Rølvaag went to St. Olaf College, in Northfield, Minnesota, with thoughts of studying for the ministry. Two other interests, however, were stronger: his intense dedication to preserving Norwegian heritage in America and his love of literature, particularly the works of Bjørnson and Ibsen. During his junior year he began a novel, *Nils and Astri*, an idyllic tale in which an important issue for a group of Norwegian settlers in North Dakota is how much of their native culture should or could be preserved in the new land. Although he hoped to see the work in print before graduation, it was rejected and remains unpublished. In 1905–1906 Rølvaag finished his formal college work with a year of study at the University of Christiania (Oslo), and then returned to St. Olaf as a teacher in the academy. The year in Norway was especially rewarding, for he completed his courses with the highest grades attainable and in the process proved to himself that he was now more American than Norwegian. He wrote to Jennie Berdahl that he took deep pride in his high grades because "I was an American, and the big fellows in Christiania have not much faith in us." When he landed in New York on his return, the rush of the city overwhelmed him: "I liked it, I liked it," he later told Lincoln Colcord. "Tears came to my eyes. This was America, my country. I had come home."

For the next twenty-five years Rølvaag taught at St. Olaf, the leading college of Norwegian-Lutheran background, continued his crusade for biculturalism, and wrote a series of essays and novels that explored the dilemma of the Norwegian in an American environment. In 1910 he began to write *The Third Life of Per Smevik* (*Amerika-Breve*), the first of his published works and the first to have a western locale and theme. Set in eastern South Dakota between 1896 and 1901, the novel appeared under a pen name be-

cause of the highly personal nature of the adventures described. *The Third Life of Per Smevik* is a disguised account, in epistolary form, of Rølvaag's first years in America, of the hard physical labor, of the struggle of the immigrant to master the language and a host of new ways, of the power that greed had over many on the prairie, and of his own fight to rise above the poverty and ignorance of his station in life. When the novel was published in Minneapolis in 1912, it received a number of favorable reviews, with particular praise being given to the accuracy of the picture of farm life on the prairies. About the accuracy at least there seems little doubt. As Rølvaag's brother Johan wrote to him, "As far as subject matter goes—these are merely the letters you have written home to Father and me."

The next two novels continued the theme of the power of the prairie to seduce the immigrant away from his cultural roots into an "America fever" for material wealth. *On Forgotten Paths* (1914) is the story of such an immigrant, Chris Larsen, who sells his soul for the rich farmland around Elk Point, where Rølvaag had lived and worked. Although it is a melodramatic exaggeration of a man obsessed with the prairie, the novel is important for its picture of immigrant life in South Dakota and on the plains of Canada, as well as for its foreshadowing of the two main characters of *Giants in the Earth*: Chris, like Per Hansa in *Giants*, is the aggressive, even arrogant, land-taker, a metaphor of naked human will; and Magdalene, like Beret, is the troubled pioneer wife, haunted by memories of her homeland and certain that her greatest sin was her immigration.

In *Pure Gold*, first published as *To Tullinger (Two Fools)* in 1920, Rølvaag intensified the theme of material wealth as the fatal temptation for the immigrant farmer. A second-generation Norwegian couple, Lars and Lizzie Houglum, wring from the soil every dollar they can and increase their hoard by means of sharp dealings with their neighbors. Although they survive bank failures, confidence men, and the anti-foreigner hysteria of World War I, they succumb at last to their own greed and fear, virtually committing suicide as they try to protect their savings. In an ironic ending that crystallizes Rølvaag's disdain for the poor exchange many immigrants had made in trading their cultural heritage for prosperity, the undertaker burns their clothes—and their money belts—because of his fear of disease, and so the tens of thousands in bank notes that they have cherished and guarded as if they were children turn into slender columns of blue smoke that dissipate in the prairie sky.

The last of the novels to be written before Rølvaag's prairie masterpiece *Giants in the Earth* was *The Boat of Longing*, published in Norwegian in 1921. The main character is the idealist Nils Vaag, who hopes to find goodness and beauty before he has lived long enough in the real world to experi-

ence its disillusion. Once again Rølvaag is interested in the immigrant's attempt to transplant himself to America. But America is not the ideal land for many, especially for the sensitive dreamer who seeks spiritual growth in a country that nourishes a hearty materialism instead. And so Nils is increasingly disillusioned, first in Minneapolis, where men live like beasts, then in a logging camp in northern Minnesota. In the final section, Rølvaag turns from Nils's story to that of his heartbroken father, who travels from Norway to America in a hopeless effort to find his son. Two of the themes that were to concern Rølvaag in the prairie trilogy are central here: the struggle of the immigrant to retain his identity in an alien land and the cost in human suffering both to those who emigrated and to those who remained behind.

When, in early 1923, he read that the well-known Norwegian writer Johan Bojer was planning a novel about the settling of America, Rølvaag was spurred to take on the task himself, one that he had been contemplating for some time. He was convinced that he was the man for the job—even though he had come long after the West had been settled—because he had devoted his life to a study of the dilemma of the Norwegian-American and because he himself had worked the land, had wandered over the last frontier in the Dakotas, and had married into a pioneer family whose memory was rich in settlement lore.

He immediately requested a leave of absence from St. Olaf College and spent the next twelve months writing at top speed, first at his retreat at Big Island Lake in northern Minnesota, then briefly in Sioux Falls at his father-in-law's house, even more briefly in London, and finally in Oslo, where Aschehoug's Forlag, Norway's largest publishing firm, finally accepted the new novel for publication. In itself the acceptance was a remarkable testimony to Rølvaag's genius, for he was only the second Norwegian-American writer ever to be published by a Norwegian firm, the first being Waldemar Ager in 1910 with *Christ Before Pilate*. Rølvaag's novel appeared in 1924 and 1925 in two parts, *I de Dage: Fortaelling om Norske Nykommere i Amerika* (*In Those Days: A Story of Norwegian Immigrants in America*) and *I de Dage: Riket Grundlaegges* (*In Those Days: The Founding of the Kingdom*), and he was immediately hailed by Norwegian critics as a major writer and a master of the language, accomplishments he had scarcely dreamed were possible. In America, however, recognition came more slowly; two years were to pass before an English version was published, translated by Rølvaag and Lincoln Colcord and called *Giants in the Earth* (1927). The novel was an even greater success in America, for it was chosen as a Book-of-the-Month Club selection and went into its thirty-third printing by the end of the year. The reviewers were quick to place it at the forefront of the pioneering novels;

Carl Sandburg, himself the son of Swedish immigrants, ranked it among the six most important American novels, past and present, and it has remained in print ever since, assuming the position of a classic in American fiction and vindicating the judgment of the first enthusiastic reviewers.

The story of the novel is that of Per Hansa and his wife Beret and their settlement in the early 1870s on the South Dakota prairie frontier, on the high ground west of the Big Sioux River where Per can establish the kingdom he has been seeking ever since coming to America years before. Here is his chance to experience adventures, to own land, to become wealthy, in short, to act out the career of the Ash Lad of Norse fairy tales who rises from the humblest origins "to win the princess and half the kingdom." Per moves from one victorious adventure to another, subduing the virgin prairie, building an ingenious sod house and supplying his family's needs with a cleverness and a dedication that arouse the envious admiration of his neighbors. It seems to them that there is nothing he cannot do. But Per's plan for winning his West is seriously flawed: he will not gain the happiness he seeks without a loving and supportive wife. And while he confidently overcomes one obstacle after another, he ignores the deep psychological distress that is slowly growing in her. The Dakota prairie for her is an alien and demonic force in mortal combat with the settlers, quite the opposite of the beautiful and spiritually nourishing mountains and valleys of her homeland. Although the first indications of Beret's impending insanity appear during the lonely hours when Per is away from home, it is his destruction of the Irishmen's claim stakes that leads to the first break between husband and wife and a deepening of her emotional suffering. In Beret's mind the explanation for his crime is clear: "This desolation out here called forth all that was evil in human nature. . . . What would become of children who had to grow up in such an atmosphere? . . . Her soul shuddered." Beret's agony increases until she loses her sanity, and only after the first minister comes to the Spring Creek settlement is her emotional health restored.

While Beret personifies the immigrant pioneer's fear of external and internal dangers, Per personifies courage and stubborn will. He commits himself to denying the power of his Norwegian past and to constructing upon its ashes his own fabulous kingdom. His is that "indomitable, conquering mood which seemed to give him the right of way, wherever he went, whatever he did." Beret, on the other hand, clings to the past and to her homeland as the sources of her emotional and spiritual strength. It is this diametrical opposition in outlook, a duality like that in his own character, that Rølvaag places at the center of the meaning of *Giants in the Earth*. When, toward the end of the novel, the first Norwegian Lutheran minister appears in the settlement, he brings wonderful comfort to Beret, for he

avers that the immigrant pioneers seated before him are truly founding a kingdom, albeit one that will be a blessing in the future “only in so far as they remained steadfast to the truths implanted in them as children by their fathers.” The message, however, is a bitter blow to Per Hansa, for he is constructing his kingdom alone, he believes, and to accept God’s supremacy anew is to give up his independence and indeed his very manhood. In the end Per maintains his will intact, but it is a hollow victory. His final mission, to brave a blizzard in order to bring a minister for his dying friend Hans Olsa, is almost a reflex action: Per will again prove to his neighbors that he is the invincible one, but he will also hurl defiance once more at the God of his fathers, who demands faith and obedience. This time he fails.

After Per Hansa’s death, by an ironic turn of fate Beret herself accepts the challenge of the prairie and fulfills her dead husband’s dream of establishing the kingdom. But in the process she loses many of the qualities that at times had made her an endearing figure in *Giants in the Earth*. The two sequels that complete the prairie trilogy, *Peder Victorious* (1929) and *Their Fathers’ God* (1931), tell the contrasting stories of Beret, the traditionalist, and her son Peder, the representative of the Americanized second generation. In *Peder Victorious* Beret devotes herself to the twin tasks of managing her prosperous farm and of preserving the heritage of Norwegian language, custom, and faith that she sees rapidly disappearing from the community. Her son Peder, however, is caught in the conflicting pulls of loyalty to home and eagerness to become assimilated. In the process, Beret and tradition lose out; Peder discards everything that she treasures and seals the rejection of his Norwegianness by marrying Susie Doheny, his Irish-Catholic sweetheart.

In *Their Fathers’ God* Beret remains the most strongly delineated character, but she becomes an increasingly unsympathetic one, relentlessly clinging to her old values and unfairly critical of her daughter-in-law Susie. Peder and Susie, by contrast, hardly come to life as real characters, so obviously do they represent each side of the conflict between Norwegian Lutherans and Irish Catholics in Spring Creek. It is Peder’s grudging admission at the last that he is American *and* Norwegian which holds the only hope for the future, because his heritage is essential to his happiness. But the admission comes only after his mother’s death and the breakup of his marriage.

When Rølvaag died in 1931, his concept of a rich and vital America composed of hyphenated immigrant groups in healthy touch with their national heritages seemed to be passing with him. Fewer and fewer of his own people, certainly, were able to read Norwegian, and many of those who did resented the harsh realism in Rølvaag’s portrayal of the pioneering experi-

ence and its aftermath. But today, with a widespread new interest in roots among all American groups, it appears that something at least of Rølvaag's dream is still alive. More important, as the attention of scholars is increasingly directed to the phenomenon of immigration, it is as clear as it has ever been that the history of the country will not be written until each nationality has completed its own story, and that the history of the American West will not be complete until each group has defined its part in creating that geographical and psychological entity. The literary history of the American West, in turn, can be perfected only when the western work of immigrant authors, written in their native languages, is made accessible in translation. More than half the people who settled the West, after all, were immigrants, and much of the story of their adventuring and suffering on the American frontier still lies hidden in the obscurity of foreign-language novels, stories, newspapers and magazines, and masses of letters and diaries.

The question of whether Ole E. Rølvaag is an American author is easier to decide today than it was half a century ago. As Rølvaag himself argued, two chapters in American history stand out above the rest: the Westward Movement and Immigration. He was fully a part of both. Moreover, in large measure the two are inseparable and can be defined only in terms of one another. Lincoln Colcord, Rølvaag's translator, opened his Introduction to *Giants in the Earth* with these words: "It is a unique experience, all things considered, to have this novel by O. E. Rølvaag, so palpably European in its art and atmosphere, so distinctly American in everything it deals with . . . ; in Rølvaag we have a European author of our own—one who writes in America, about America, whose only aim is to tell of the contributions of his people to American life; and who yet must be translated for us out of a foreign tongue." Rølvaag himself devoted his life to the effort to teach his Norwegian countrymen that they could be good Americans *and* good Norwegians, could—in fact—be better citizens of the new country by preserving their cultural heritage from the old. That meant for him language, customs, folk-ways, and the rich cultural and religious heritage of the fatherland. And yet, while his masterpiece is the most authentic and most powerful depiction ever written about the Norwegian immigrant experience on the western prairies, it is also one of the most successful portrayals of the sod-house frontier as it was experienced by immigrants of every stripe, and Americans, too. Rølvaag thought of *Giants in the Earth* as "a *document humaine*, one that should be true for all racial groups, more or less, and endure the acid test of time"; and so far he seems to have been right.

II

It is appropriate that the novelist who has been most often compared to Ole Rølvaag should be Herbert Krause, author of *Wind Without Rain* (1939) and two other western novels and, like Rølvaag, a spokesman for his own ethnic group, the Germans of western Minnesota. Upon the appearance of *Wind Without Rain*, no lesser critics than John Gould Fletcher and Lincoln Colcord, among many, praised Krause as a successor to Rølvaag in the realistic treatment of life on the northern prairies; and the comparison was made again by critics and reviewers after the appearance of *The Thresher* in 1947, when Krause's earlier promise seemed to have been confirmed. The comparison is appropriate, certainly, because of the similarities in subject matter and treatment in their novels, but it takes on an added interest in that Krause's admiration for Rølvaag led him to set out consciously to tell the story of his people as Rølvaag had told the story of the Norwegians. Because of Rølvaag, St. Olaf College (Northfield, Minnesota) was sacred ground to Krause, "literarily speaking," although the two men never met. Rølvaag died shortly after Krause arrived on campus, but his influence continued strong during Krause's three years there. In an unpublished student essay on his own Lutheran heritage, Krause asked: "Is it not time for the appearance of writers imbued with Lutheran idealism but possessing the artistic eye and the warm sympathy of a Rølvaag to interpret our heritage accurately yet sympathetically?" In a few years Krause would begin to answer that question.

Unlike Rølvaag, however, who had absorbed the Norwegian classics as a youth and admired them all his life, Krause was very little affected by novelists of his own national group, whether writing in America or in Europe. Brought up in the narrow valleys of western Minnesota ("Pockerbrush," as he called the region), he had little contact with the mainstream of German-American intellectual life. While most German immigrants elsewhere in the Middle West, like those depicted in August Derleth's novels about the Wisconsin River Valley settlements, were more prosperous than their Scandinavian neighbors because they brought more capital with them to America, the Germans in Pockerbrush had little material wealth and fewer cultural possessions; they knew virtually nothing of the German-American literary heritage, even of so popular a writer as Charles Sealsfield, whose early nineteenth-century adventure novels of the southern and southwestern frontiers were widely read in America and Europe. Instead, apart from the influence of German folkways in Pockerbrush, the chief literary influ-

ences on the youthful Krause were the American magazine stories and the novels of the 1920s and, as he insisted in later years, the King James Bible and the works of Shakespeare.

Herbert Krause was born on May 25, 1905, on a small farm ten miles north-northeast of Fergus Falls. The township of his birth is called Friberg, a name given it in 1874 by the German settlers there. His parents were poor farmers, descendants of some of those settlers who had immigrated from Saxony and Mecklenburg. Herbert's childhood in the hills of Friberg was like all childhoods, a mixture of pleasure and pain, of failure and success, but for him the beauty and the hurt of growing up burned more deeply into the heart and mind than was true for most youngsters. He was small for his age, a runt he called himself later, with a good-sized chip on his shoulder. And he stood out as different among the children of the neighborhood because of his intellectual precocity and his love of literature.

As early as age ten he determined to become a writer and started keeping a notebook in which he recorded those events, observations, and impressions that most affected him. Although his friends and a few favorite relatives encouraged him in his choice, his parents thought otherwise. Once an eldest son had been confirmed and had finished school, they believed, his duty lay in helping to support his family, in this case five younger brothers and sisters. If there were to be more education for Herbert, they insisted, it would have to be preparation for the ministry, and it could not happen soon. His efforts to teach himself to write fiction and poetry, consequently, were viewed with suspicion. The money he spent in 1922 in enrolling in the Short Story Department of the Hoosier Institute they considered a waste, and they discouraged even the purchase of magazines.

Instead, Herbert's parents argued, he should consider educating himself for the Missouri Synod Lutheran ministry, but only when he had earned the necessary money himself and only when his younger brother Julius was old enough to be able to manage the farm on his own while the father ran the blacksmith shop. This seems to have been an idea which Herbert shared to some degree, for he was devout as a youth, convinced of the rightness of his church's doctrine—although not of some of its excesses. In a letter to Wallace Stegner in 1939 Krause looked back with less than total sympathy at the more rigorous aspects of his own religious training: "I've had a solidly pious up-bringing in a Lutheran home—which means endless hours of Bible reading and catechism; which means parochial school, more Bible, catechism and doctrine by the yard; which means church on Sunday and fire and brimstone from the pulpit, the worthlessness of man and the glory of heaven—'I'm but a stranger here, Heaven is my home.' I've never had an opportunity to forget that."

In October 1926, despite his desire to attend a German Lutheran school, Krause enrolled in the academy division of Park Region Luther College, a small co-educational Norwegian Lutheran Synod school in Fergus Falls. After three years he went on to Concordia Teachers College (River Forest, Illinois), a school of his own synod, in order to prepare to be a parochial school teacher. But because of the severe hazing he underwent there, he left after only three days and enrolled at Concordia Theological Seminary in Springfield. That experience was no better. As had been the case at River Forest, Krause was placed below where he had hoped, in the latter instance two full years away from beginning the four-year seminary program, and so his frustration continued to mount. In a few days he returned to Fergus Falls and the welcoming arms of President Einar Wulfsberg and the Norwegians at Park Region, there to complete his first two years of college.

In the fall of 1931 he enrolled at St. Olaf College, hoping to come under the influence of Ole Rølvaag. Instead he became the protege of Professor George Weida Spohn, and for him wrote out the first sixty-one pages of a story about a domineering father and a rebellious son; it was the outline of what would become *Wind Without Rain*. Krause carried the pages with him to the University of Iowa in 1934, where he earned the M.A. with a small collection of poems called "Pockerbrush" as his thesis. That spring, too, he received word that he had been awarded a six-weeks' scholarship for the summer of 1935 to the Bread Loaf School of English. The best part of Bread Loaf was meeting such writers as Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Theodore Morrison, Stephen Vincent Benét, and Robert Frost. The latter two in particular impressed Krause, both poets and Pulitzer Prize winners and both warmly supportive of his verses. Krause wrote to his mother: "Met Frost, the greatest poet in America today, and he likes Pockerbrush." In his turn, Frost kept track of Krause through their mutual friend Charles Foster, and in early 1937 wrote cheerfully of Krause as one of his great hopes and asked him to bring something to read the next summer.

At Iowa in the fall of 1935 Krause began his struggle toward the Ph.D. degree and at the same time tried to come up with an idea for a creative project that could serve as a doctoral dissertation. Late in 1935 there arrived an odd but timely inquiry from Simon and Schuster. One of the editors, Maria Leiper, had seen Krause's short poem "Hillside Burial" in *American Prefaces*, had admired it, and wrote: "Is there any chance that you're at work on a novel? If so, and your commitments permit, we'd like very much to hear from you." Burdened as he was with coursework, Krause delayed any further contact until the following fall when he sent thirty pages of *Wind Without Rain* to Leiper. With her encouragement and that of Professors Wilbur Schramm, Edwin Ford Piper, and Norman Foerster, Krause con-

tinued to write, submitting the material to other publishers as well, until Bobbs-Merrill accepted the novel in October 1937, on the basis of 150 typed pages. The completed work was published on February 13, 1939.

The main threads of the narrative in *Wind Without Rain* are threefold: the complicated relationship within the Vildvogel family, in which Father Johan's brutal mistreatment of his four sons leads to their hatred and rebellion; equally complicated relations between the family and their neighbors in the hills; and the story of Franz's love for two girls and his virtual destruction because of them. Despite the efforts of the gentle mother to stand between her sons and the father's wrath, two of them run away and one, Franz, is left an emotional cripple by the end of the novel. The fourth, Jeppy, the narrator, is injured in a sledding accident and remains an all-but-helpless observer. It is his voice that speaks the whole of *Wind Without Rain*, the words of an invalid recalling from a distant hospital their impoverished life in Pockerbrush, "a sort of hen-fight to snatch from life a moldy rind of happiness. . . ."

Critics and reviewers were impressed with the novel on its appearance, particularly with the dark mood sustained throughout and with the beauty of Krause's poetry. Nature is portrayed as pitiless but lovely, they noted: pain begets pain, and goodness and gentleness are crushed more often than nourished. The New York Times reviewer found it impossible to say anything temperate about *Wind Without Rain*: "almost all of its qualities are in excess," she wrote. The world he presents is not so much a real corner of Minnesota as it is "some peculiarly joyless and tortured realm of the mind." Wallace Stegner, in *The Saturday Review*, found its realism to be its strength, in combination with its richly rewarding prose. "We have waited a long time," he said, "for a writer who could, without compromising in the least the integrity of his observation, or softening his picture of the world, still transmute that real world into beauty." On March 16, 1939, in Chicago, with fellow Minnesotan Sinclair Lewis looking on, Krause was awarded the \$1000 Friends of American Writers Award for the year's best novel of mid-western life.

Following the success of *Wind Without Rain*, Krause delayed his second novel for eight years, teaching at Augustana College (Sioux Falls, South Dakota) and paying off debts, and enjoying the turn of Fortune's wheel that had flung him up from poverty into literal fame and fortune. As early as October 9, 1933, to be sure, he had recorded in his diary the passing of Bill Welbrock, the last of the picturesque threshers in the Hills, and had noted that threshing was worthy of a story. And in the summer of 1937, when he was laboring on *Wind Without Rain*, he wrote to Norman Foerster, Director

of the Iowa School of Letters, that among the projects to follow was a novel about the threshers and another of young and old farmers in conflict. He was to combine the two in *The Thresher*, begun in earnest in late 1943 and published finally in January 1947.

Once again the scene is Pockerbrush and once again the central character is a young man, struggling against a variety of human and natural forces as he attempts to realize his potential. In this novel, however, a single character dominates the action, Johnny Black, a figure like Rølvaag's Per Hansa or Chris Larsen—who is driven by a dream of power to exploit his neighbors and to seek revenge for a series of real and imagined injuries. As the owner of first one and finally three threshing machines, he extracts tribute from the wheat farmers of the region as if he were a king and they his subjects. In the process he loses his best friend Snoose in a threshing accident and watches his unchurched wife Lilice—much like Per's wife Beret—go mad with the fear of God's wrath and retribution. He cannot, however, prevent the sweep of change in the valley: just as his steam-powered rigs drove the old horse-power out of business, so the new gasoline tractors begin to replace steam. Johnny's ending is doubly ironic: he dies attempting to rescue his obsolescent rig from a fire, on the very day that his wife Lilice regains her sanity and looks for his return.

Once again Krause received extensive and largely favorable reviews, with many critics acclaiming *The Thresher* as superior in plot and poetic style to *Wind Without Rain* and most agreeing that Krause belonged among the important writers of American fiction. Nevertheless, despite book club sales that approached 400,000, Krause was depressed by the fact that by March the novel had fallen from the best seller lists and that only 15,000 copies were sold through regular outlets. It was a discouraging turn of events, a foreshadowing of his eventual decision to give up novel writing.

The last of Krause's novels to see print was *The Oxcart Trail* (1954), a deeply researched adventure tale about old St. Paul and white and Indian relations on the forest frontier in Minnesota. As his most "western" novel, it includes the familiar motifs: the flight west to escape the law, the rough-and-tumble life of a frontier village, the overland trek through hostile country, skirmishes with the Chippewa and Sioux, and even the love affair between the frontiersman and the school teacher. The central character of the novel, Shawnie Dark, is less fully realized than either Franz Vildvogel or Johnny Black. Although some of the same themes are there—a haunting fear that pursues him, love for a seemingly unattainable woman, and the hard and often brutal life on the frontier—the story ends happily after many arduous adventures, with the hero and heroine contemplating their future

as settlers in the Ottertail River country, the country that later would be called Pockerbrush.

Many critics were hard on *The Oxcart Trail* for its leisurely narrative, its banal love story and the occasional lapses in continuity. Their objections and the novel's relatively poor sales were irritating, to be sure, because of the exhaustive research that Krause had done in order to create a fictional treatment both fresh and authentic of a time and a place that were of great significance in the winning of the West. Even more galling was the knowledge that during the writing the editorial staff at Bobbs-Merrill had encouraged Krause to curb "over-gloomy introspection" and to make this new book "a warm novel full of laughter and triumph." They had called it his best work while he was writing it, and had hurried him into publication to boot. Although it sold better than most novels that season, its total sales were fewer than 10,000, well below *Wind Without Rain* and far below *The Thresher*. Krause considered it a failure.

The last twenty-two years of his life until his death in 1976 Krause devoted largely to teaching and to a new love that he had acquired in the late 1940s, ornithology. Most of his later research and writing was done in that field, and while he still nourished the hope of producing more novels, he eventually scrapped the plans for two Pockerbrush tales, one a psychological study to be called *Emma-August* and the other the story of a war veteran who tries to bring his Japanese bride back to the narrow confines of the hills above Fergus Falls. Krause's last full-length works were *Crazy Horse* (1960), an elaborate outdoor pageant (unpublished), and *Prelude to Glory*, an edition of the newspaper accounts of Lt. Col. George Custer's invasion in 1874 of the Black Hills in what is now South Dakota. While competent and important in their own ways, neither approached the significance of his first two novels; these last books lay too far in the distance from those powerful experiences that had shaped Krause's youth, the mud and dust and sweat of German-American immigrant life in the Pockerbrush hills.

ARTHUR R. HUSEBOE, *Augustana College*

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HERBERT KRAUSE

Published Books

Neighbor Boy. Iowa City, Iowa: Midland House, 1939. Thirty-nine lyric and narrative poems with Pockerbrush themes.

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Prelude to Glory: A newspaper accounting of Custer's 1874 expedition to the Black Hills.

Edited with Gary Olson. Sioux Falls, South Dakota: Brevet Press, 1974.

The Thresher. 1946; rpt. Sioux Falls, South Dakota: Brevet Press, 1976.

Wind Without Rain. 1939; rpt. Sioux Falls, South Dakota: Brevet Press, 1976.

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