

EDVARD HOEM:

Villskapens år. Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson 1832-1875.

Forlaget Oktober, Oslo, 2009. Pp. 667.

ISBN: 978-82-495-0288-2.

Vennskap i storm. Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson 1875-1889.

Forlaget Oktober, Oslo, 2010. Pp. 621.

ISBN: 978-82-495-0747-4.

Syng mig hjem. Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson 1890-1899.

Forlaget Oktober, Oslo, 2011. Pp. 669.

ISBN: 978-82-495-0855-6.

Det evige forår. Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson 1899-1910.

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Confronted by multiple bulky tomes, the reviewer is tempted to begin by counting: four volumes, 2704 pages, 77 years – an average of 35 pages for each year of Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson's life. Only a very remarkable man could merit such intense and dedicated scrutiny.

Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson was a very remarkable man. As Hoem says in his summing up at the end of the final volume, no other Norwegian author had anywhere near as much influence on the development of Norway during the second half of the nineteenth century – and that, in a country where authors have traditionally been seen as pioneers and prophets, is to say quite a lot. Bjørnson was a man of enormous energy and drive, fascinated by all aspects of politics, culture and society, brimming over with enthusiasm and commitment. He had a finger in every pie, an opinion about every topic, a conviction that his was the correct way of seeing things and a zeal to convert others to his view which led to a continuous torrent of letters, articles and speeches as well as the poems, plays, novels and short stories for which he is remembered in literary histories. Living at the same time as Henrik Ibsen, and linked to him by lifelong literary rivalry as well as by family connections (his daughter Bergljot married Ibsen's son Sigurd), he loomed larger in the national consciousness than did his subsequently more famous fellow playwright. It was Bjørnson who won the Nobel prize, not Ibsen. Yet there are few today who read his novels or stage his plays. He was fundamentally a man of his time, and with the passing of that time the general public's interest in him has faded. But the pivotal role he played in a turbulent era means that he remains a central figure in any attempt to chart the political, social or cultural history of the period. One cannot but be grateful to Edvard Hoem for taking on the enormous task of sifting the mountains of material which document the life and activities of this man, and presenting the first comprehensive account of all of his many sides.

Tradition has placed Bjørnson on a pedestal, says Hoem – and one thinks automatically of Stephan Sinding's statue outside the National Theatre in Oslo, where he stands four-square and bombastic beside the contrastingly introverted figure of Ibsen. Hoem's declared aim is to take him down from that pedestal, to show him as an ordinary man with all his faults. And faults he certainly had. He acted first and

thought afterwards. For all his perspicacity and his generosity, he could be both obtuse and callous. His long-suffering wife Karoline was made ill by his behaviour on more than one occasion; when he fell in love, he did so with a passion which swept aside all other concerns. He treated his children unequally; Hoem examines particularly his unfair treatment of his oldest son Bjørn, the most loyal and considerate of his sons, who supported him both personally and professionally in his role as theatre director, and whom his father continually complained about and would not listen to. His other sons Erling and Einar wasted large amounts of their father's money, and yet he continued to support and excuse them. He was a great seducer – yet he claimed that he had never seduced anyone. He maintained that he had always respected his children's wishes and never interfered in their lives – yet he did little else. 'På enkelte punkt må ein tilstå at sjølvinnsikta hans ikkje er overtydande' (At certain points one must concede that his self-knowledge leaves something to be desired, Vol. III, p. 222) Hoem remarks drily at one point.

In politics Bjørnson often misjudged the situation, particularly in the long-drawn-out battle over the dissolution of Norway's union with Sweden. He was phenomenally tactless, often damaging his own cause because he could not stop himself from wading in when it would have been better to keep quiet. He went his own way in the language debate, using an orthography which was different from anyone else's. And – a heinous act in the eyes of this particular biographer – he was a virulent opponent of *landsmål* (*nynorsk*), describing it as a crime against his native land. It is Bjørnson's fault, says Hoem with feeling, that there is still today an argument about the legitimacy of Norway's second language.

No cause was too great for Bjørnson, explains his biographer, and no cause was too small. He was as exercised about the optimal placing of letter boxes in apartment blocks in Kristiania as he was about the cause of Italian independence. What is more problematic is that the same can be said of this biography. We follow Bjørnson through all his many great and small causes with an attention to detail which can become wearying. There are too many long quotations from material which is available elsewhere. Potted summaries of all of Bjørnson's works

are provided as they are mentioned. The narrative is a chronological one, which at times becomes pedestrian, and there are repetitions of information and arguments. And there is a feeling of imbalance throughout. In the first volume Hoem announces that this is to be a two-volume work, with the first volume covering the first 43 years of Bjørnson's life, and the second the final 35 years. The Afterword to the second volume confesses that he was forced to change his plan after realizing how much material remained, and announces that there will be a third volume; the Afterword to the third volume throws up its hands in despair and begs the reader's indulgence to wait for a fourth. All this argues a certain lack of planning, to put it mildly.

The feeling of imbalance intensifies during the reading of the first volume. We meet Bjørnson when he is fifteen years old and proceed from there. There is little mention of his parents and his early childhood, and his siblings are mentioned only incidentally. One hesitates to ask for *more* information in this mammoth work, but this does seem unduly sketchy. It may have happened because Hoem's previous book focused on Bjørnson's father, but that does not help the reader of this biography. Bjørnson's first 25 years are dealt with in 190 pages – which leaves 2554 pages for the rest, or 49 pages for each year of the life. The last volume has 68 pages per year. It seems Hoem has been increasingly overwhelmed by his material; if only it had all been digested *first*. There is a marvellous story here, but it is struggling to get out. With modern technology some of the supporting documentation could have been provided for researchers online, and a good editor could have helped to shape and organize the narrative.

With such an enormous subject, and trying to do justice to half a century of Norwegian cultural, social and political history as well as the life of an extraordinary individual, it is almost inevitable that there will be some inaccuracies. Let me take one example where I have the research at hand to check on Hoem's account in detail: the relationship between Bjørnson and Amalie Skram. In broad outline Hoem gives an accurate picture of their tempestuous history, and it is gratifying to read an account of Bjørnson's life in which Skram takes her rightful place as an important actor. Initially dismissive of her work, Bjørnson came in time to recognize and celebrate Skram as a major author.

Hoem sums up their significance for each other in a striking paragraph: 'Dei tok vare på det som gjekk føre seg mellom dei, og slik gav dei, hundrevis av mil frå kvarandre, ei gave til oss som lever sidan, ved at vi kan kjenne i sjela korleis dei var dregne mot kvarandre, også no da den første ungdommen var forbi. ... tilhøvet hans til Amalie Skram, det var eit vennskap som på ein måte var meir enn kjærleik. Ho var likeverdig med han, i tankekraft og emosjonell kraft.' (They preserved the communications between them, and in this way, although they were hundreds of miles apart, they gave those of us who live later a gift which speaks to our hearts of how they were drawn to each other, even after their first youth was past ... his relationship with Amalie Skram was a friendship which in a way was more than love. She was his equal in intellectual and emotional power. Vol. III, p. 522.)

However, there are unnecessary errors in this story which undermine the authority of the narrative. When describing the final communications between the two of them, Hoem states that Bjørnstjerne and Karoline made a surprise visit to Amalie Skram in February 1904, when they did not see her because she was out. She wrote to them afterwards to regret missing them and to say she was not coming to dinner at the Hegels to meet them. They never met again, and Amalie died on 13th March in hospital in Copenhagen after a short illness (Vol. IV, p. 280). The facts are these: Amalie was not out when the Bjørnsons called, but was upset that they had not warned her in advance, because she was in the middle of spring cleaning. She wrote the note to them 'immediately after you left' to regret the mess. She did say that she would not go to the Hegels, but wrote two days later to Julie Hegel to say she would try to come, although she had said she would not - 'but that was of course nonsense'. So this may not have been the last time she saw the Bjørnsons. The date of her death was 15th March, and she did not die in hospital, but at home; her daughter Johanne came home from school to find her mother dying. (All these events are related in my biography of Amalie Skram, which is included in Hoem's bibliography, but has not, it seems, actually been consulted.)

In the English-speaking world Bjørnson's name is practically unknown; there is no biography of him, and there have been few recent translations of his works. Yet some of his poems and some of

his short stories remain masterpieces of their genre, and his influence can still be felt in many areas of Norwegian life today. Now that all the spadework has been done, it would be good to have a much reduced English version of the biography, along the lines of Ingar Sletten Kolloen's Hamsun biography, which might provide the essence rather than the substance of the man.

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