

Lecture by H.E. Mr. Hens Engen, Ambassador of Norway,  
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Europe's Contribution to American Civilization.

I have assumed that in this series of lectures I am expected to speak of the part played by Norway in Europe's contribution to American civilization. I shall be happy to do so to the best of my ability. The topic is as intriguing as it is wide in scope, but I am afraid time will not allow me to make a very comprehensive excursion into the field.

Let me preface my remarks by telling you of a little episode which in a glimpse reveals to you, I think, the substance of Norwegian contribution to American Civilization.

President Johnson during his visit to Norway in September last year, visited during his stay in Oslo one of the larger factories in that city. Several hundred of the workers were gathered in the cafeteria and the President was supposed to address them there. He started his little speech in this way: "How many of you have relatives in the United States, will you please raise your hand." About 85% of all the workers raised their hand.

As I said, this episode is quite revealing of the nature of Norway's contribution to American life. It consists first and foremost of people, common people, who crossed the Atlantic to seek work and new means to earn their daily bread. They fled their country not because of religious or political persecution, they fled from poverty and unemployment. Those who left the country were usually the best, the most ambitious. They were good stock, used to hard work, a rough country and a tough climate.

Today there are some 3 millions Americans of Norwegian descent, including second and third generation and also people with at least one grandparent being a Norwegian. The population of Norway today is 3,6 millions. During the 19th century, since 1825, when the first group of emigrants set out from Stavanger, altogether 800,000 persons have emigrated from Norway to America. This was a considerable blood-letting for a small people, and it probably changed the fate of Norway in some respects more than it had an impact on the history of the United States.

This organized emigration which started in 1825 and came to an end, for all practical purposes, before the first world war, I shall revert to later on. I feel that it would be useful for the perspective to say something about the earliest emigration from Norway to America which we know of.

Recent explorations in New Foundland carried out by the Norwegian explorer Dr. Helge Ingstad, has established beyond doubt that Norse settlers came to this Continent around the year 1000. Remains of houses, utensils, weapons and even remains of pits for the melting of iron-ore, have been unearthed. They are exactly of the same type as those which have been found in Norway, Iceland and Greenland.

I think there is now every reason to say that the credibility of the old Icelandic sagas has been established for good. Their description of the discovery of America or "Vineland the Good", as it is called in the sagas, is on the whole accurate. Therefore there is reason to believe that the Norse settlers penetrated as far south as Cape Cod and Long Island, perhaps as far south as Chesapeake Bay.

The old Norsemen were excellent navigators, although they had neither maps nor compass. They used the stars, and from the detailed description of the constellation of the stars in the sagas, it is possible to determine at what points on the North American East Coast the observations were made.

As you may know, the name given to the new land, "Vineland", has nothing to do with "vine". "Vin" is an old Norwegian word for "meadow". Thus Vineland means "the land with the green meadows". This is also an accurate description of the land in Northern New Foundland, where the first settlers apparently came. But, I am sorry to say: The Norwegians cannot claim to have made that major contribution to American civilization, namely the introduction of the grape and the wine.

There are in the sagas rather vivid accounts of the natives, the Indians, whom the Norsemen met. They called the natives "skrællinger", meaning weak and feeble persons. This name is, however, at times contradicted by the sagas' description of fierce battles which the Norsemen had to fight with these "skrællings".

The first European that set its foot on North American soil came there via Greenland. This was quite natural, since the Norse settlements in Greenland were closer to the North American Continent than any other Norse settlements in the North Atlantic. It was primarily between the Greenland settlements and the American settlements that contact was maintained for a period as long as 3 - 400 years. Then for reasons not fully explained, the settlements in Greenland perished, and from then it did not last long until

the settlers on the American Continent shared their fate. Separated from their home base it looks like that they soon succumbed to their two main enemies, i.e. disease and the "skrællings".

The Norse expansion westward in the 9th, 10th and 11th centuries, reaching Dublin and Scotland in the south and Iceland, Greenland and the American Continent in the north, may be considered to be the final events in a historical epoch, which was characterized by the vast movements of people from the east, probably beginning in Asia, through Eastern Europe to the British Isles and Scandinavia. On their way these hordes destroyed the Roman Empire, split up the embryonic European state of Charlemagne, brought the Anglo-Saxons to the British Isles and finally the Norwegians to North America.

This historical process lasted for some 1400 years. It determined for all times the geographic structure of the European Continent and the nature of European culture. Thereby it also became the main source of American Civilization.

Norway and the rest of Scandinavia were on the fringes of these historical developments. The Norsemen who started the trek across the North Atlantic Ocean were relatively primitive as regards technical and cultural standards, at least measured with a Continental European yardstick. They were no doubt superior to the Indian tribes which they encountered in North America, but they did not have much of cultural values, not even a religion based on a universal concept, which could have made an impact on the primitive Indians.

However, the Norse settler in North America did not only fight the Indians, he also traded with them. Norse red cloth was barded with furs from the Indians, and it may well be that the first mink coat worn by a European woman came from North America.

Linguists have maintained that certain words and expressions in some Indian languages are Norse loan words. It is a well known phenomenon, especially when the words are names on tools, weapons, utensils, etc.

However, interesting all these things may be for the historian, the fact remains that in spite of some 400 years of contact between Norsemen in Norway, Iceland, Greenland and Vineland, no major contribution was made to what today is American civilization. Those who may be said to have made a certain contribution, are the authors of the sagas, who described the people and the land of Vineland as they heard it told by those who had been there. This early literature which has a high artistic standard, belongs to our common heritage and is standard curriculum in schools and colleges describing the dawn of American history.

I feel that I have to turn to another epoch in order to come closer to the kind of cultural contributions which the organizers of this lecture series had in mind. This epoch is characterized with the mass emmigration from Europe to America in the course of the 19th century. In other words, I shall revert to my opening remarks about the movement of 800.000 Norwegians to this Continent.

Not only is this a very large part of a country's population, particularly when we take into account that this

emigration took place at a time when Norway's population never exceeded 3 millions. But also in terms of America's population in the 19th century is this a large group of people.

The questions I put before myself here is this: What could these people contribute to American civilization? And, secondly, what did they really contribute?

In trying to answer these questions I shall have to suggest to you an acceptance of the thesis that, like an individual, also a people, a nation, has certain characteristics. They have a character. Everyone of us who have travelled to various countries has experienced the difference in character he has encountered between one people and another.

Let me quote an authority on these theme, Ludvig Holberg, the great playwright and philosopher of the 18th century's Dano-Norwegian Kingdom, born in Norway, but living most of his life in Denmark. He wrote in one of his "epistles": "That they (the Norwegians) insist so much on their own opinions, some consider a virtue, others a vice ...". One must observe, however, in this connection, that some are most insistent in their opinions because they believe themselves to be right, and would rather earn the hatred of others than say anything but what they think."

And then incomparable Hans Chr. Andersen in one of his fairy tales, "The rags". One Danish rag and one Norwegian rag were thrown away in a corner. The Norwegian rag introduced itself in this way: "I am a Norwegian, said the Norwegian. And when I say that I am a Norwegian, then I think I have said enough! I am stable as the mountains of

old Norway. My country has a constitution like Free America! It thrills me to the marrow when I think what I am, and let my thoughts ring out in words of granite!"

Well, you may consider this self confidence a virtue, or you may say it is a vice. But, there is no doubt in my mind that this characteristic played a role in the Norwegian settlers' contribution to "The Winning of the West."

I think that, essentially, the contribution Norwegians have given to the growth of this nation, must be measured not in big names and spectacular individual achievements, but rather in the every day labour of the common man and woman, in their houses, in their fields, in the forests, in the mines, in the factories, and last, but not least, on ships under American flag on the seven seas.

Having said this, I also think it is fair to say that there are certain areas of what today is American civilization where Norwegian individuals and groups have made a lasting impact. I have in mind that singular group of Norwegian civil engineers who came to this country around the turn of the century. Their activities are described in a book published in 1947, written by Kenneth Bjork. Its title: "Saga in Steel and Concrete" is no doubt accurate. These engineers came to this country with the skills they had acquired at the technical schools and colleges in their home country, which for their time ranked among the best in Europe. But even more valuable was their experiences from building bridges in that very mountainous country of Norway. It was literally the techniques from bridge-building in Norway which were applied to the construction of sky-scrapers, this impressive symbol of The New World. A group of these Norwegi-

engineers built the "Cathedral of Commerce", the Woolworth Building in New York, which at that time was considered one of the seven wonders of the world. One of these engineers also designed the structured framework in the Statue of Liberty.

The pioneer in tunnel building in this country was the dean of these Norwegian engineers, Ole Singstad, who built the Holland tunnel under Hudson River.

These Norwegian engineers who migrated to America were a pioneering group. They found new materials with which to build and they designed machines that frequently started new industries. They laid highways from coast to coast. They spanned the rivers of their adopted country with bridges of steel and concrete. In metallurgy they introduced fundamental and revolutionary changes, and when changing needs of industry required, they planned new cities and made old ones habitable. Using techniques of their homeland, they transformed forests into pulp and paper. Furthermore, they put the accuracy of science into plant management, to eliminate rule-of-thumb procedures. In these and other ways they gave their skills and energy to a mighty development that changed the face and life of the New World. Thus they did play a part in laying the material foundation upon which the American civilization rests.

If we turn to the areas of letters and arts of various kinds, it is more difficult to evaluate Norwegian contributions. Art is by definition more evasive than engineering when it comes to determine influences. But here is not only a question of one painter influencing another, or one writer influencing another.



It is obvious for instance that Ibsen has influenced Eugene O'Neill. "The Iceman Cometh" has many resemblances to Ibsen's "Wild Duck". Arthur Miller's plays have much in common with Ibsen's "social" plays.

A more relevant factor to establish in order to determine contributions from one country's culture to another country's culture, is the extent to which the thinking, the attitude to the fundamental questions in a man's life, have influenced the thinking and the attitude in the other country.

In the case of Norway - USA, it is probably true that there, over a long period of years, has been a two-way traffic of ideas and attitudes.

The millions of letters which have been exchanged between relatives in USA and in Norway over a period of 125 years, have carried new and old thoughts to both sides. Some of these letters have been published. It is highly interesting reading. They did not deal solely with how the family was or how the crops came out. The Norwegian is a highly developed political person. He got his free constitution in 1814, for a great part based on the American constitution. And equally important, he got a high degree of local self-government in 1836, a fact that more than anything else has contributed to his political education. This is reflected in the letters. And the immigrants brought with them from Norway a political tradition which was exceedingly democratic both in form and spirit. This, I think, was important. In many rural areas where Norwegians settled as farmers, they had to take care of their own local affairs in their own fashion, manage American political

institutions, conducting district affairs and holding town-meetings even before they could speak the language of their new country. Thus they maintained the ideas of local self-government inside a federal system, which, for better or for worse, has set its stamp on the areas of the United States where the population of Norwegian origin is numerous. As one student of this period has observed: "The ballot was as much of a necessary tool in their life as the ax, the spade, the hoe, the plow and the harrow."

It is against this background that the Norwegian-American's participation in state and federal government must be viewed. The political leadership they exercised was thus developed from the ground up in a genuine democratic tradition. Many leaders of Norwegian origin have taken high places on the stage of public affairs, but perhaps more significant is the fundamental circumstance that the immigrant played an active part in the functioning of the gras-root democracy which they took part in shaping.

If I should venture to mention one name among those Norwegians who made a contribution to American political life, that of Knute Nelson may be appropriate. He came to America as a boy, took part in the war between the States, became governor of the state of Minnesota, and spent the last 28 years of his life as a United States senator. He brought the Norwegian individualism with him, frequently disagreeing with his party when his conviction told him so. In questions of foreign affairs it looks like his words carried great weight.

The burden of my remarks concerning Norwegian contribution to American civilization is, as you have heard, the role played by the Norwegian element in the population of this country. This role is difficult to evaluate in concrete terms. But it is definitely there. Personally, I am convinced that certain characteristics of the average Norwegian man and woman have helped to establish certain ethical standards which are accepted by the average American man and woman. These characteristics are: 1) "passion for independence" and 2) "no tolerance of control."

These words are not mine. They were spoken by Ludvig Holberg, the Danish-Norwegian philosopher in the 18th century, and whom I quoted earlier in this speech.

I take the liberty to suggest that these two characteristics are deeply imbedded in American history and that the influx of 800,000 Norwegian men and women into the United States did strengthen their position in this country.

On this note I shall end my remark, and thank the leaders of Suffolk University for having let me come here and participate in this meeting.