

## Foreign Literature

### Out of Scandinavia

SKÁLHOLT, JOMFRU RAGNHEIDUR.  
By GUDMUNDUR KAMBAN. Copenhagen:  
Hasselbach. 1931. 2 vols.

Reviewed by SIGNE TOKSVIG

ONE believes Gudmundur Kamban, when he says in his preface to "Skálholt," that he has taken a thousand big pages of notes from the archives in various countries for this historic novel of the seventeenth century in Iceland. But, far more important for the reader outside Iceland, one believes in the people whom he has recreated. Before the first chapter is over, one feels: I can safely give myself to this book, it isn't going to cheat, it is a piece of new life that I am going to be able to live, piquantly different in setting and psychology from our own, and yet credibly alike in the depths of it. And the promise of the first chapter is kept. The book is real and alive clear through.

You have no choice but to believe in the young heroine, Ragnheidur; you feel her beauty and her strength of character, and you feel the anguish that pierces her, when she learns that Dathi, the man whom she secretly loves, has had to do with another woman. Ragnheidur's father is the Bishop of Iceland, a stern, just, powerful man, and Dathi is his favorite among the many young men who belong to the almost feudal establishment. The bishop has even made Dathi his daughter's tutor, but for her marriage he has definite plans, not including the tutor. Ragnheidur, determined as one of the Fates, soon forces the brave Dathi to explain that his misstep was due to his despair at her unattainability. Whereupon she discloses her feelings for him, and the school hours become hours of love. There is gossip. A jealous rival breathes the gossip to the bishop. Horrified, the father realizes that the gossip has spread so far and so unseizably that there is only one way in which he believes she can clear herself. It is the traditional way of a public oath. She must stand up on the church floor before the whole congregation and swear that she is *virgo intacta*, a virgin free of the touch of man, and six good men and true must stand up and swear with her that they believe her. The oath will be surrounded by the holiest pomp of the church. Will Ragnheidur do this, her father asks.

Ragnheidur blanches. She loves her father and would do anything to save him pain. But she shrinks from this, she begs him not to force her to this public shame. He insists, and she yields.

The pride of Ragnheidur in going through with this, the tense solemnity of the scene, nothing could be better done. And life then goes on as before, only that Ragnheidur and Dathi are not now so careful. Who would suspect them now? The girl's pure strength supports the man, who has had to give in to her, though it means breaking his promise to the bishop about not giving even the shadow of an excuse to gossip. He writhes in spiritual torture when the bishop insists on ordaining him, to give him a living as a pastor. But he dare not refuse.

Then, not long enough after the virgin's oath, a kinswoman of Ragnheidur, Helga Magnúsdóttir, a living saga woman charges her with being pregnant. The girl coolly admits it. This is the high point of the book and one is made to share some of Helga Magnúsdóttir's terror and amazement. How Ragnheidur is able to explain things satisfactorily to her kinswoman, and how Helga takes her home and shields her from all prying eyes, brings to a conclusion the first volume.

The "Jomfru Ragnheidur" part of "Skálholt" is not, however, a first volume in the sense that it cannot be read separately. It can. It is full of other characters besides those mentioned, all vivid. It differs from its nearest fictional relatives, Sigrid Undset's novels, in its clarity, brevity, and dry sense of humor. But the unifying element in it is the story of the beginning of love and its first white-hot flame in strong, pure, passionate natures. Gudmundur Kamban writes this with such feeling, such sureness of touch, such forceful simplicity, and such complete absence of sentimentality, that even had there been no second volume, of Ragnheidur's love tested by life, we should still be deeply grateful to him.

The second volume is the somber aftermath, the long winter after the brief Icelandic summer. Ragnheidur, sheltered during her pregnancy by a woman relative of the same indomitable temper, bears her child, and now her father, the stern, righteous, autocratic Bishop has to be told. The two pastors who bear the news to him ride

as if under a heavy weight; the awful weight of Ragnheidur's apparent perjury. The strength and delicacy with which Kamban describes the fulfilment of their task and its effect on the Bishop are unsurpassed. Ragnheidur's return to her father, for the confronting of those two strong natures, her long intense ordeal of separation from her lover and child, her pathetic death so unsentimentally told—one is forced to the sagas for comparisons. It is the same mastered ardor, the ice-clad volcano, the themes of life and death, love and conflict of wills, treated with terrible simplicity. The tragedy is almost more than one can bear, and yet one must read to the ironic end, where the Bishop, who loved his daughter and killed her, draws a sigh of relief: he has succeeded in getting her reputation cleared by royal decree.

If Ragnheidur's lover does not return except for their passionately tragic parting, and if Icelandic legalism takes up a good deal of space, that is history. Some of the history and some of the characters, vividly drawn though they be, may not seem very relevant to Ragnheidur. They are not supposed to be. Although this second volume closes the life of the Bishop's daughter, the story of her father and son will be told in another volume. But Kamban has given Ragnheidur such appealing life that her fate seems more important than Iceland's. It is a book whose keen freshness and hard, sure mastery are not easily forgotten.

### A Note from Athens

By GEORGE PANOU

PRESENT-DAY Greek writers—and these are many—are verily an unhappy lot. They have to put up with a very slowly declining public indifference to reading, with a language not only not definitely stabilized but also read by nearly the smallest single group of people of the entire continent, with the shocking competition of the ubiquitous and superficial newspaper and of the still more superficial French book. But, well, why go on with my lugubrious tale?

Why go on when all these have not daunted that prolific Zantiote who takes such a queer pleasure in putting his address at the end of every novel of his? I mean Gregory Ksenopoulos, the ablest and busiest of the prose writers of contemporary Hellas. Recently he was elected a member of the Literature Section of the Athens Academy, the creation of General Theodore Pangalos, the one-time quasi-Dictator of this land of ours. This Academy is, by the way, a new institution and, at best, a gentlemen's club. What it may become is, of course, quite another story. Another event for him must surely have been the recent turning into a fair film, by a local company, of one of his earlier and better novels, "Stella Violantis," a love story of considerable amusement and modernity. (I hope that my own translation into English of "Laura," another one of Mr. Ksenopoulos's novels, will soon see the light.)

The literary and theatrical circles and, in fact, most reading Greeks, are delighted with the laurels won in the States by Marika Kotopoulis, the fine emotional actress.

No note from Athens should ever end without a word about our politics. The Republic is now seven years old, serene but very, very poor, a little lazy, and last but not least, in the arms of a "nurse" that is not so very wonderful after all in times of peace. I mean Venizelos.

"Rummaging in one's shelves, almost at random," says Allan N. Monkhouse, in the *Manchester Guardian*, "one finds few classics which can be said to begin inappropriately. True to the tradition of the historical novel, 'Romola' starts with a 'proem' which doesn't carry us far into the story, but in 'Middlemarch' we get to Dorothea in the first line; it may be recalled, too, that Jane Austen began her famous novel with 'Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich.' The death of the old bishop and the discomfiture of his son, the archdeacon, mark the opening of 'Barchester Towers'; 'Jane Eyre' begins with Jane and the shocking family Reed. 'Lord Jim' with a description you could hardly forget of Jim and his early experiences. Such beginnings are natural enough, and 'The Brothers Karamazov' is very much in the Russian tradition with its considerable descriptions of characters in the story. 'The Old Wives' Tale' begins with the two sisters and their environment, 'The Man of Property' with the Forsyte family 'in full plumage,' 'Tono-Bungay' with a kind of warning very well in its place in that remarkable novel."

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## Points of View

### New Mexican Spanish

To the Editor of *The Saturday Review*:  
Sir:

I should like to invite a consideration of the point involved in Oliver La Farge's suggestion that there is an error in the grammatical form of one of my New Mexican Spanish sentences in "Starry Adventure"; a small point, but leading to a much larger matter. Mr. La Farge may be right. New Mexico Spanish is so little book Spanish that I employed a young woman familiar with it by birth and bringing up, to go over every word of mine and see that it corresponded with the common usage. If she was anywhere in error, I am so much out, and am grateful to Mr. La Farge for calling the matter to my attention.

About the other point raised, whether too many Spanish words were used, there is much to be said. This is practically a bilingual country; courts are conducted and the legislature and, in many towns, public worship, in two languages. Everybody uses more Spanish words than he realizes, especially names of things. My own servants communicate with me in a jargon in which it would be difficult to say whether there is a majority of words from one tongue or the other. Even the best Spanish you hear in New Mexico is interlarded with "Oh, Boy's" and "You Bets," and names of American utilities; there are springing up around us popular songs, mixed of phrases in both languages. But this is singular; there are no more Spanish locutions in New Mexico than there are Negro locutions in the speech of the South, or Yiddish locutions in all our literature dealing with certain sections of New York. Frank Applegate, than whom there has been no more careful student of folk speech in the Southwest, thought that straight English constituted no more than half the local speech, the rest of which was derived from Spanish, Indian, and local occupations. Actually there is much more Spanish in "Starry Adventure" than even Mr. La Farge found in the footnotes; Spanish which has been used so long that few people realize that it is not English: canyon, arroyo, loma, chile, patio, placita, adobe. In deciding which of these should be treated as Spanish and which taken for granted, I was moved by experience of the number of letters I habitually receive from readers demanding to know what a particular word means. Footnotes do seem out of place in a novel, but what else is one to do in a bilingual country? My guess about this situation is that in another fifty years, New Mexican Spanish will be spoken only in remote hamlets, and that the common speech of New Mexico will employ as English at least fifty per cent more Spanish words than it does now. These will be selected chiefly from the list of words describing things for which English has no root words, such as arroyo, canyon, bajada, barranca. The question I wish to raise is: Does not English absorb many such words from other tongues? Do we not, all of us who write away from the centers of English colonization, employ largely hybridized locutions? I am often entertained by editors, practically all of whom have rejected stories of mine written in American Indian dialects, and in their next issue publish stories in dialects from Eastside New York, Michigan, Georgia, or Oklahoma. Isn't it a fact that we are so accustomed to dialects in American fiction that it is only when the speech from which they are derived has a different vowel system or rule of accent, that we notice them as dialects?

This brings me to Mr. La Farge's other comment on my use of Spanish accents. He calls them "lawless," but that is not quite the case. I disregarded the Spanish rule purposely—and against the advice of my paid expert—in order that the fall of the word in the sentence should keep within the writer's original intention to make the rhythm of the words express something of the feeling of the subject. Perhaps I am unduly sensitive to rhythms, but what American pronunciation does to Spanish in the way of misplaced accents is so much more dreadful than anything it does to vowels—and that is bad enough—as for example making *ro-dy-o* out of the long, musical *ro-dé-y-o*. Whatever a Spanish scholar would make of them, the average American reader is bound to get the stress right according to my accent marks. After all, my allegiance is not to Spanish as such, but to New Mexican Spanish as a potential contribution to American speech.

I am indebted to Mr. La Farge not only for an appreciative and profoundly understanding review, but for making the op-

portunity for this explanation, which covers a genuine problem of writers in the Southwest and, whether they know it or not, in many other sections of these United States.  
MARY AUSTIN.

### "Eskimo"

To the Editor of *The Saturday Review*:  
Sir:

I have just finished reading a truly great book. Because in my own life I have experienced so much of the material out of which this book is fashioned, I think that I can speak, perhaps, with almost legal affirmation in calling the finished work of this man truly great. The book I speak of is "Eskimo," by Freuchen.

For many years I lived in the far North. I have myself known close and dear friends amongst the Eskimo—friends about whose human and delightful qualities my heart-strings knotted tightly, so that to leave and lose them was a bitter pain. For years I have myself been writing of the North, attempting to explain to fellow Americans the richness of the human treasure we possess in these so under-prized Eskimo neighbors. But as I put down Freuchen's book, I knew that here my own dear Muk-pi's people lived again, in real and vivid actual fact. Here is the beauty and the wonder and the power of that High North we Northmen love because we must who know it—the shapes of things, the colors, lights, and shades, changes, surprises.

Have literary critics suffered from some mental gum-disease, that this strong meat of mingled fact and story hasn't as yet been chewed by them with exquisite relish? In "Eskimo" a people are alive. In "Eskimo" one lives again the nomad North. In "Eskimo" the tundras and the ice-fields stretch away, and one again rushes across and back into our own lost Northland racial past—a Beowulf epic of the North, but of the North's today and actual now.

I—who do so love the North and Mala's people who have made the North their own, through exquisite perfected adaptation to its mighty schooling—I wish that all whose hearts are open to a human tale of perfect truth, might read and come to know the great adventure of brotherhood with Mala, and Mala's people.

MARY LEE DAVIS.

Washington, D. C.

### Thomas Buchanan Read

To the Editor of *The Saturday Review*:  
Sir:

I am seeking some additional information as to Thomas Buchanan Read. When and where did Harriet Dennison Read, widow of Thomas Buchanan Read, die? Did he leave a will? If so, was she the executrix?

What has become of Read's paintings? Are any of them in any of the galleries in this country? Any other information about Read will be greatly appreciated. There are many gaps in the life-facts I have gathered; I shall be grateful for any help I receive.

I. C. KELLER.

California, Pa.

### Walt and the Hall of Fame

To the Editor of *The Saturday Review*:  
Sir:

I saw Walt's entrance into the Hall of Fame! and for his birthday celebration we picnicked at Glendale. We made for the woods along Timber Creek near Camden, N. J., where he used to sun-bathe and sing. Then we had a programme, and the man who'd bought the Stafford place where Walt used to board in the summer introduced a brass band. We crowded into the little country M. E. church and sat on undertaker's chairs as it was chill and darkling outdoors, and, my God! but the brass band blared in that tiny place, a change from the Gloria trumpeters in their angel robes in the Hall of Fame. Duncan Spaeth read some "Leaves," and so did Harrison Morris, and a man sang "O Captain, my Captain," and we all Star Spangled. Then we ate our box lunches in the church basement round a wood stove. Some boys were brewing coffee in a wash-boiler out on the next lot over a bonfire. I think Walt must have been on hand, maybe more strongly than at New York University. At the Hall of Fame most of the people were too old and the ladies galoshed and rubbered, they didn't represent Walt's physical ideals at all. It had poured all day, and while Markham was reading his slightly deprecating poem to Walt I slipped away to a cocktail party.  
M. V. N. S.

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## AMOK

A Story by STEFAN ZWEIG

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