

Hale, Christopher, ed. 2005. *Aksel Sandemose and Canada: a Scandinavian Writer's Perception of the Canadian Prairies in the 1920s*. Regina: University of Regina, Canadian Plains Research Center. 183 pages. ISBN: 978-0-889771840.

Aksel Sandemose and Canada is divided into four parts: Introduction, Factual Articles, Anecdotal Articles and Fictional Stories, and a helpful Bibliography and Index.

The introduction does an excellent job of describing Danish immigration to Canada. Christopher Hale manages to condense the essentials of Danish settlement: the churches, the leaders and the colonies or settlements. He also provides an account of Sandemose's early years up to his immigration to Norway. There are many possible aspects of Sandemose's life that he could have emphasized but Hale has chosen to concentrate on the role Canada played in Sandemose's life.

Contemporary Canadians tend to have little sense of the efforts that Canada made to attract settlers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Specifically the Canadian government and the Canadian Pacific Railway energetically promoted immigration. Hale summarizes these efforts, quickly establishing the lack of an answering policy from the Danish government. Sandemose's visit to Canada was indeed made possible by invitations that both the Canadian government and the CPR issued to the Danish government asking it to send representatives. Before Sandemose there were a number of Danish individuals and a delegation that had visited Canada. Olaf Link Linch, for one, came to Canada in 1925 and wrote that only people who were prepared to work hard physically should consider emigrating. Later this is a recurring theme in Sandemose's articles. He constantly emphasizes the factory-like aspect of farming on the prairies where workers are treated as little better than machines.

Unlike other visitors to Canada who wrote articles and books about the country chiefly to provide guidance to potential immigrants, Sandemose's principal goal was to establish himself as a writer. By the beginning of 1926 he was having trouble getting published. He continued to write but also continued to have problems with debt. Finally in May of 1927 Gyldendal, his publisher, agreed to provide money to his wife to support her for up to seven months. Sandemose left Copenhagen on August 10 to begin his Canadian journey. The CPR provided him with a pass to ride on their line and also paid for his round-trip passage to and from Canada. He was obviously resourceful and persuasive for he also managed to get a pass on the CNR.

Department of Writing, University of Victoria, Emeritus.

In some ways Sandemose was an odd choice for the public relations job of encouraging people to emigrate to Canada. His own early life had been difficult and, to some extent, unproductive. Perhaps this caused him to focus on hardship rather than success; whether it was from his own experience in Canada or from having read the articles and books by the writers who preceded him, he focused a great deal upon the harshness of immigrant life.

In the opening factual article, "Prairie Women", his view seems gratuitously cruel. He describes a woman in her late thirties with "a look of hopelessness in her eyes." He says that some months later he reads that she has found a husband in Manitoba. One would think he would see this as something positive but he adds "these older girls often become heavy crosses for their husbands to bear." His comments about married couples are even bleaker.

In "The Emigrant's Start" he begins a theme that he returns to time and again, the brutality of the work that is expected from the immigrants. He admits that the pay is good, \$30 to \$60 a month. He also describes the logging camps where work can be found during the winter, though the labour involved is worse even than working on a threshing crew. "The entire crew sleeps on a shelf along one of the walls—a form of communism which means no one gets the blame for being more lice-covered than anybody else."

Fortunately his themes of brutal work and terrible living conditions are leavened by comments about the beauty of Canadian parkland. And he admits, "That time I spent in the prairie winter has given me some of life's most beautiful memories." "When the prairie rose is in bloom and the wheat is tall enough to hide a man, it's not easy to dispel the thought that there is nothing more beautiful in the world."

His writing, in spite of its focus on loneliness, isolation, and depression—particularly among women—, contains flashes of humour. He has a keen sense of the absurd: "Once when I was out with a couple of farmers, I dressed in white pyjamas, while my companions walked around in the discarded nightgowns of their respective wives. It was not without comic effect, as we all looked far too scantily clad for the -30 degree weather." What is impressive in Sandemose's writing is his eye for detail: "But if there's a thaw after a large snowfall, the frost causes a crust to form on the snow, and then come hard times for the horses which cut their legs trying to break through it." In "Medicine Man" he describes a farmer "calculating his annual account with chalk on the backside of a shovel blade." It's in his anecdotal articles that his command of the language is best seen. In "Belle-Isle to Montreal," he begins with a poetic description of a foggy night with icebergs appearing out of the mist. Later, he writes "The phosphorescence lies in the water like hammered silver."

Possibly the most powerful of his articles is "Harvest Time In Canada." Here, he describes in detail the brutality of threshing time on the prairies. Nevertheless,

Hale comments “I think it safe to say that Sandemose never did such work in Canada.” Presumably Sandemose had an ulterior motive in saying that he was working to help pay his way, but his diary provides little evidence of his having actually worked as he says he did. Instead the article is probably the result of his having talked to various men who did work at threshing. In spite of the fact that he may have written it from interviews or casual conversation, it remains a powerful description of the physical work demanded by grain farming. It does not seem like much of an advertisement for prospective settlers and later, when he applies for a job with the railway, it’s not surprising that they do not hire him.

Sandemose’s fictional tales are less satisfying than his factual and anecdotal articles, perhaps because he is trying to shape them into stories. They do not have the raw power of articles with their frank, even brutal honesty, their sharply observed details and their acute observations.

Although Aksel Sandemose is regarded as one of the most important Scandinavian writers of the twentieth century, few Canadians are aware of him. This book, with its Canadian connection, is a good way of introducing both the writer and his writing to a Canadian audience. The translations read very well. The material provides a window on a Canada that most people nowadays have never known.

If I have any quibble with the book, it is simply that as a general reader I would have preferred a different organization. The current structure would work well for a textbook; however, if someone browsing in a bookstore were to pick up the book, he or she would be turned off by the introduction. If the book started with the Factual or Anecdotal articles, the reader would be much more inclined to keep turning pages and, having read this somewhat amazing description of the Canadian West in the 1920s, would then want to know more about this author.

W. D. Valgardson
Department of Writing, University of Victoria, Emeritus.