

Armfelt, Richard M., compiler. 2009. *All I Need Now Are Some Chickens, a Cow, and a Wife*. Victoria: Island Blue/Printorium Bookworks. 368 pages. ISBN: 978-0981070605.

The book is primarily a series of letters written from Canada by a Dane, Hans Armfelt, to members of his family in Denmark from the late 1920s to World War II and compiled by his son, Richard M. Armfelt. These letters had been saved by Hans's sister Ella and brought to Canada in 1985, later to come into the possession of Richard. According to the Preface at the beginning of the book it took fifteen years to have them translated from Danish into English. They chronicle the period that began several years before Hans left Denmark in 1928 and continued through the Great Depression in the 1930s when he lived near the town of Athabasca in northern Alberta.

It's not stated specifically why Hans went to Canada, although at the time Canada was the only place in North America open to immigration after the United States started closing its doors in 1921. In addition, the railway companies such as the Canadian Pacific Railway were heavily promoting Canada in Denmark as the best place to immigrate, especially the western part.

Hans started working for various farmers in the Penhold area of Alberta and then became a house painter in Calgary. During the summer of 1929 he travelled around the province a bit and even joined the Canadian army for twelve days. After making a little money doing harvest work in southern Alberta, he used what he had earned to drive with his friend Alex up to the Peace River region of Alberta and British Columbia. In Edmonton Hans and Alex talked to some Swedes who had a farm near Athabasca and said there was still homestead land to be had there. In October 1929 they both moved up to Athabasca where Alex immediately bought a homestead. On July 12, 1930 Hans wrote home to his parents that he too had acquired a homestead. The letters go on to talk about his building a house in the wilderness, getting married to his wife Helen, the birth of his first son (the compiler of the letters) in 1934 and his second son in 1938. By December 1939 Hans had finally become a Canadian citizen. The last letter to his family in the series was written on January 8, 1940, several months before the German invasion of Denmark on April 9, 1940.

There follow three notes from Albert Svane, Ella's husband, written on Danish Red Cross forms, as well as the notes that Hans wrote in reply on the reverse sides. These contain primarily platitudes as they had to pass through censors both to and from Denmark. One note from Albert, dated March 31, 1942, has at least two words excised from it. A final note, this one not by Hans, answers request from Ella to the Danish Red Cross concerning a search for her brother. This informs her that the Canadian Red Cross has received a message stating that everything is fine with him and his family. Then there is a short account of the experiences

of Bode Armfelt, Hans's brother, in the Danish resistance during World War II. The book closes with an Epilogue that comprises a brief update to the history of Hans Armfelt up until his death in 1985, followed by a short biographical sketch of Dick Armfelt, the son of Hans and compiler of this volume. Interspersed throughout the text are photographs of family and friends taken by Hans over the years which had been sent to his family in his letters to Denmark.

Probably the most interesting aspect of the letters comprising this book is the picture they give of life in northern Alberta during the Great Depression of the 1930s. They show that to survive in northern Alberta at that time a person had to live off the land. In the southern part of the province it was extremely dry during these years with frequent crop failures, and to survive off the land there was virtually impossible. But in the Athabasca district where Hans lived the situation was quite different. There was no drought there. In spite of its location in the far northern part of the province, conditions were in fact very favourable for agriculture during the 1930s. To be sure there was no wealth, as such, but no one went hungry. If a person grew his own crops he would have more than enough food to live on, and he could build his own shelter.

The book is somewhat reminiscent of the works of two other Scandinavian writers who deal with Canada—Aksel Sandemose and Sven Delblanc. Sandemose kept a detailed day-by-day diary of his experiences in the country from his arrival in Montreal at the beginning of September 1927 to his departure from Halifax in February of 1928. Travelling through Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta, he visited primarily Danish settlements on the prairies during his trip. He used a lot of material from his diary both for articles he wrote for *Berlingske Tidende* and other periodicals and in his first novel set in Canada, *Ross Dane*.

Some of what Hans describes about prairie Canada in his letters written before the onset of the depression mirrors Sandemose's experiences. Upon arrival in Canada it appears as though Hans, like Sandemose, discovered the only place where there was a real need for workers was on farms in the spring, summer and especially in the fall during the busy harvest season. Hans comments on the food on the Canadian farms as being good and most ample. Sandemose does so as well. Both men describe the hard work and the long working day from four or five in the morning to nine or later in the evening. The howling of the coyotes is also mentioned by both and the intense cold during the winter. They each talk about hunting muskrats.

There are also similarities in the book to the experiences of the two main characters, Fredrik and Maria, in Sven Delblanc's *Kanaans land*, set during the depression. As in Sandemose's articles the bitter cold winters are described in both Delblanc's novel and Hans's letters with Hans even drawing pictures of thermometres in both Celsius and Fahrenheit marked for comparison. The drop in grain prices during the depression is followed quite regularly in both Hans's letters and Delblanc's account in his novel. Delblanc describes the migration of

people from the south escaping the drought, and Hans does the same, while also including pictures he has taken of the migrants.

Unlike Maria and to a certain extent Fredrik, Hans is very optimistic. He accepts life and his situation as it is, almost never complaining. In fact it appears that he is very happy and contented during the whole of the depression up to the start of World War II.

For this reason I feel the book contributes to a realistic understanding of what everyday life was like in Northern Alberta in the 1930s. It also gives a picture of the period during the Great Depression from a different perspective than is usually done, not stressing the negative aspects of the hard times. Thus I would recommend anyone interested in the history and culture of Alberta and the Canadian west to read this informative collection of letters.

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