GIANTS IN THE EARTH

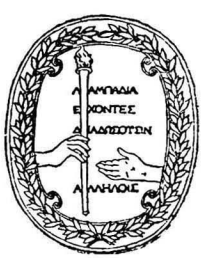
GIANTS IN THE EARTH

A Saga of the Prairie

By O. E. RÖLVAAG

AUTHOR OF "TO TULLINGER"
"LAENGSELENS BAAT," ETC.

TRANSLATED FROM THE NORWEGIAN



HARPER & BROTHERS PUBLISHERS
NEW YORK AND LONDON
MCMXXVII

GIANTS IN THE EARTH

PRINTED IN THE U.S.A.
FIRST EDITION
E-B

FOREWORD

In offering this novel to the English-reading public, I feel the need of an explanation. Book I of *Giants In The Earth* was published in Norway (Aschehoug & Co.) as a separate volume, in October, 1924; Book II, one year later.

I am aware of the slight similarity existing between Johan Bojer's *The Emigrants* and certain portions of the First Book of my novel; and lest the reader should consider me guilty of having plagiarized him, I find it necessary to offer the information that *The Land-Taking* was in the hands of the Norwegian book dealers a little better than one month before Bojer's book appeared. In a letter to me, dated January 11, 1925, Mr. Bojer writes: "It certainly was fortunate for me that I got my book finished when I did. Had it appeared much later, I should have been accused of having plagiarized you."

The work of translating this novel has been a difficult task. The idiom of the characters offered serious problems. These settlers came from Nordland, Norway; and though the novel is written in the literary language of Norway, the speech of the characters themselves naturally had to be strongly colored by their native dialect; otherwise their utterances would have sounded stilted and untrue. To get these people to reveal clearly and effectively their psychology in English speech seemed at times impossible; for the idioms of a dialect are well-nigh untranslatable. A liberal use of footnotes was unavoidable.

I am indebted to many of my friends both for good counsel and for actual help. I take this opportunity to thank them all! But most of all do I owe gratitude to Lincoln Colcord of Minneapolis. Were it not for his constant encouragement and his inimitable willingness to help, this novel would most

likely never have seen the light of day in an English translation. His services are of the kind that no one but the author himself can adequately appreciate.

St. Olaf College,
Northfield, Minnesota.
March 1, 1927.

O. E. Rölvaag.

INTRODUCTION

I

IT IS a unique experience, all things considered, to have this novel by O. E. Rölvaag, so palpably European in its art and atmosphere, so distinctly American in everything it deals with. Translations from European authors have always been received with serious consideration in the United States; in Rölvaag we have a European author of our own—one who writes in America, about America, whose only aim is to tell of the contributions of his people to American life; and who yet must be translated for us out of a foreign tongue. I think I am right in stating that this is the first instance of the kind in the history of American letters.

There are certain points of technique and construction which show at a glance that the author of this book is not a native American. Rölvaag is primarily interested in psychology, in the unfolding of character; the native American writer is primarily interested in plot and incident. Rölvaag is preoccupied with the human cost of empire building, rather than with its glamour and romance. His chief character, Beret, is a failure in terms of pioneer life; he aims to reveal a deeper side of the problem, by showing the distress of one who could not take root in new soil. Beret's homesickness is the dominant *motif* of the tale. Even Per Hansa, the natural-born pioneer, must give his life before the spirit of the prairie is appeased. This treatment reflects something of the gloomy fatalism of the Norse mind; but it also runs close to the grim reality of pioneering, a place the bravest art would want to occupy. *Giants In The Earth* never turns aside from the march of its sustained and inevitable tragedy. The story is told almost baldly at times, but with an unerring choice of simple human detail.

When we lay it down we have gained a new insight into the founding of America.

II

Ole Edvart Rölvaag was born April 22, 1876, in a small settlement on the island of Dönna, in the district of Helgeland, just south of where the Arctic Circle cuts the coast of Norway. The place is far up in the Nordland. Strictly speaking, the settlement has no name; the cove where it lies is called *Rölvaag* on the map, but it is merely an outskirt of one of the voting precincts on the island. Rölvaag, it will be seen, took his place name after coming to America; he has explained this practice in a footnote in the present work. His father's Christian name was Peder, and in Norway he would have been Pedersen; his own sons, in turn, would have been Olsen. The name is pronounced with umlauted *ö* rolled a little, as in *world;* the last syllable, *aag,* is like the first syllable in *auger.*

All the people in this settlement were fishermen. In summer they fished in small open boats, coming home every night; in winter they went in larger boats, carrying crews of from four to six men, to the historic fishing grounds off the Lofoten Islands, where the Maelstrom runs and the coast stretches away to North Cape and beyond. It was a life full of hardship and danger, with sorrow and poverty standing close at hand. The midnight sun shone on them for a season; during the winter they had the long darkness. The island of Dönna is a barren rock covered with gorse and heather—hardly a tree in sight. It looks like a bit of the coast of Labrador. An opening between low ledges of granite marks the cove named *Rölvaag;* at the head of the cove the houses of the settlement stand out stark and unprotected against the sky line. Behind them loom the iron mountains of the coast. A gloomy, desolate scene—a perilous stronghold on the fringe of the Arctic night. There Rölvaag's forebears had lived, going out to the fisheries, since time immemorial.

His father, who is still alive, is the image of a New England sea captain. The family must have been a remarkable one. An uncle, his father's brother, had broken away from the fishing life and made himself a teacher of prominence in a neighbouring locality. An older brother had the mind of a scholar; but something happened—he went on with the fishing, and died long ago. There was a brilliant sister, also, who died young. These two evidently overshadowed Rölvaag while he was growing up; his case as a child seemed hopeless—he could not learn. Nevertheless, he had a little schooling, mostly of a semireligious nature. The school lay seven miles away, across the rocks and moors; that gave him a fourteen-mile walk for his daily education. He went to school nine weeks a year, for seven years. This ended at the age of fourteen, when his father finally told him that he was not worth educating. That was all the schooling he had in Norway.

Once during the period of childhood he was walking in the dusk with his mother; they had been gathering kelp on the rocks which they boiled and fed to the cattle; and now they were on their way home. His mother took him by the hand and asked him what he wanted to be when he grew up. "I want to be a poet," he told her. This was the only time he ever revealed himself to a member of his family. He remembers the quiet chuckle with which his mother received the news; she did not take him to task, nor try to show him how absurd it was, but she couldn't restrain a kindly chuckle as they went along the rock path together. That winter they had only potatoes and salt herring to eat, three times a day; his mother divided the potatoes carefully, for there were barely enough to go around.

In place of education was the reading—for this was a reading family. The precinct had a good library, furnished by the state. Rölvaag had learned to read after a long struggle, and his head was always in a book. The first novel he ever read was Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* in the Norwegian. All of Cooper's novels followed, and the novels of Dickens and Captain Marryat and Bulwer-

Lytton. Then came the works of Ingemann, the Danish historical novelist; the works of Zakarias Topelius, the great Swedish romanticist; the works of the German, Paul Heyse; and the complete works of their own great novelists, especially Björnson and Jonas Lie. For miscellaneous reading there were such things as the tales of Jules Verne and H. Rider Haggard and Alexandre Dumas, Carlyle's *The French Revolution,* and Stanley's *Across the Dark Continent.* Neither did they lack the usual assortment of dime novels and shilling-shockers, in paper covers. The list could be extended indefinitely; the parallel with the reading of the better-class American boy of a generation ago is little short of astonishing.

This reading, promiscuous but intensive, lasted through the period of his youth. Once it was rumoured that at a certain village, fourteen miles away, a copy of *Ivanhoe* could be obtained; Rölvaag set out on foot to get it, and was gone two days on the journey. There is another incident, slight but deeply revealing, which shows the promise wrapped up in the husk of boyhood. In a moment of exaltation he decided to write a novel of his own. He may have been eleven or twelve when this creative impulse seized him. All one afternoon he spent in his bedroom writing; with infinite labour he had completed as many as five pages of the novel. Then his elder brother, who shared the room with him, came in—the brilliant brother of whom he stood in awe. "What are you doing there?" asked the brother. "Nothing," Rölvaag answered, hastily trying to conceal the fruits of his first literary effort. "Let me see it!"—the brother had quickly sensed what was going on. "I won't!" And so the battle had started—a terrific struggle that nearly wrecked the room, in the course of which the five pages were torn to shreds. But the brother had not seen a word of them. Rölvaag never attempted literary composition again until he was completing his education in America, fifteen years afterward.

Awhile later we find him reading Cooper and Marryat aloud to the fishermen at Lofoten, during the winter lay-up:

there was a splendid library at this remote station, too, maintained by the state for the use of the fishing fleet. By this time Rölvaag had become a fisherman himself, like everyone else in the community. He went on his first trip to the Lofoten fishing grounds at the age of fifteen. In all, he fished five years, until he had just passed twenty. Every year he was growing more discontented. In the winter of 1893 a terrible storm devastated the fishing fleet, taking tragic toll among his friends and fellow fishermen. The boat he sailed in escaped only by a miracle. This experience killed his first romantic love of the fishing life; he sat down then and wrote to an uncle in South Dakota, asking him for a ticket to the United States. Not that he felt any particular call to go to America; he only thought of getting away. He longed for the unknown and untried—for something secret and inexpressible. Vaguely, stubbornly, he wanted the chance to fulfil himself before he died. But the uncle, doubtless influenced by Rölvaag's family reputation, refused to help him; and the fishing life went on.

Two more years passed, years of deepening revolt—when suddenly the uncle in South Dakota changed his mind. One day a ticket for America arrived. The way of escape was at hand.

Then a dramatic thing happened. All the fishermen went to the summer fair at the market town of Björn. At this fair, boats were exposed for sale, the finest fishing craft in all Norway. Rölvaag's master sought him out and took him down among the boats. His admiration for this master was extravagant; he speaks of him to-day as a sea king, the greatest human being he has ever known. The man led him directly to the best boat hauled out on the beach. They stood admiring her. He led him aft, under her stern, where they could see her beautiful lines. He patted her side as he spoke. He said: "If you will send back the ticket to your uncle, I will buy this boat for you. You shall command her; and when she has paid for herself she shall be yours."

The offer swept him off his feet. Never, he affirms, can

he hope to attain in life again a sensation of such complete and triumphant success as came to him at that moment. A new boat, the backing of the man he admired and loved above all others, a place at the top of his profession at the age of twenty, a chance to reign supreme in his little world. And yet, nothing beyond—it meant that this was all. To live and die a fisherman. No other worlds—the vague, beautiful worlds beyond the horizon. "I will have to think it over," was his answer. He turned away, went up on a hillside above the town, and sat there alone all the afternoon.

This young man of twenty sitting on a hillside on the coast of Norway, wrestling with his immense problem, takes on the stature of a figure from the sagas. Which way will he make up his mind? "It was a fine, clear day in Nordland," he tells me, speaking of the incident thirty years afterward. A fine, clear day—he could see a long way across the water. But not the shape of his own destiny. The life he knew was calling him with a thousand voices. How could he have heard the hail of things not yet seen? Where did he get the strength to make his momentous decision? He came down from the hillside at last, and found his master. "I am sorry," he said, "but I cannot accept your offer. I am going to America."

III

Rölvaag himself has told about the journey in his first book, *Amerika-Breve* (*Letters from America*), published in 1912, a work which is largely autobiographical and which struck home in a personal way to his Norwegian-American readers. He landed in New York in August of 1896. He was not even aware that he would require money for food during the railway trip; in his pocket were an American dime and a copper piece from Norway. For three days and nights, from New York to South Dakota, he lived on a single loaf of bread; the dime went for tobacco somewhere along the vast stretches unfolding before him. Through an error in calculation his uncle failed to meet him

at the country station where he finally disembarked. He had no word of English with which to ask his way. The prairie spread on every hand; the sun was going down. He walked half the night, without food or water, until at last he found Norwegians who could direct him, reached his uncle's farm, and received a warm welcome.

Then began three years of farming. At the end of that time he knew that he did not like it; this was not the life for him. He had saved a little money, but had picked up only a smattering of English. A friend kept urging him to go to school. But his father's verdict, which so far had ruled his life, still had power over him; he firmly believed that it would be of no use, that he was not worth educating. Instead he went to Sioux City, Iowa, and tried to find work there—factory work, a chance to tend bar in a saloon, a job of washing dishes in a restaurant. But nothing offered; he was forced to return to the farm. He had now reached another crossroads in his life; a flat alternative faced him—farming or schooling. As the lesser of two evils, he entered Augustana College, a grammar or preparatory school in Canton, South Dakota, in the fall of 1899. At that time he was twenty-three years old.

Once at school, the fierce desire for knowledge, so long restrained, took him by storm. In a short while he discovered the cruel wrong that had been done him. His mind was mature and receptive; he was able to learn with amazing ease; in general reading, in grasp of life and strength of purpose, he was far in advance of his fellow students. He graduated from Augustana in the spring of 1901; that fall he entered St. Olaf College, with forty dollars in his pocket. In four years he had worked his way through St. Olaf, graduating with honours in 1905, at the age of twenty-eight. On the promise of a faculty position at his *alma mater,* he borrowed five hundred dollars and sent himself for a year to the University of Oslo in Norway. Returning from this post-graduate work in 1906, he took up his teaching at St. Olaf College, where he has been ever since. Professor

Rölvaag now occupies the chair of Norwegian literature at that institution.

IV

I have mentioned the *Amerika-Breve,* published in 1912. There is an earlier work, still in manuscript—a novel written during his senior year at St. Olaf College. In all, Rölvaag has published six novels, two readers for class use, a couple of handbooks on Norwegian grammar and declamation, and one volume of essays. In 1914 appeared his second book, *Paa Glemte Veie* (*The Forgotten Path*), a relatively unimportant product. Then came the war, which threw consternation into all creative work. Rölvaag walked the hills of southern Minnesota, his mind a blank, facing the downfall of civilization, seeing the death of those fine things of life which he had striven so hard to attain. It was during the war period that he compiled his readers and handbooks, for the publishing board of the Norwegian-American Lutheran Church.

He had married in 1908. In 1920 a tragedy occurred in his family—one of his children was drowned under terrible circumstances. This seems to have shaken him out of the war inertia and stirred his creative life again. That year he wrote and published his first strong novel, *To Tullinger* (*Two Fools*), the story of a rough, uncultivated couple, incapable of refinement, who gain success in America and develop the hoarding instinct to a fantastic degree. This book, too, made a sensation among Norwegian-Americans.

Then, in 1922, came *Laengselens Baat* (*The Ship of Longing*), which seems to have been Rölvaag's most introspective and poetical effort up to the present time. It is the study of a sensitive, artistic youth who comes to America from Norway full of dreams and ideals, expecting to find all that his soul longs for; he does not find it, with the result that his life goes down in disaster. Needless to say, this book was not popular with his Norwegian-American audience.

The truth-teller of *To Tullinger* was now going a little too far.

All of these works were written and published in Norwegian. They were brought out under the imprint of the Augsburg Publishing House, of Minneapolis, and circulated only among those Norwegian-Americans who had retained the language of the old country. The reason why none of them had reached publication in Norway is characteristic. In 1912 the manuscript of *Amerika-Breve* had been submitted to Norwegian publishers. They had returned a favourable and even enthusiastic opinion, but had insisted on certain changes in the text. These changes Rölvaag had refused to concede, feeling that they marred the artistic unity of his work. In anger and disappointment, he had at once published with the local house; and with each successive volume the feeling of artistic umbrage had persisted —it had not seemed worth while to try to reach the larger field.

But in the spring of 1923, an item appeared in the Norwegian press to the effect that the great novelist Johan Bojer was about to visit the United States, for the purpose of collecting material on the Norwegian-American immigration. He proposed to write an epic novel on the movement. This news excited Rölvaag tremendously; he felt that the inner truth of the Norwegian-American immigration could be written only by one who had experienced the transplanting of life, who shared the psychology of the settlers. His artistic ambition was up in arms; this was his own field.

He immediately obtained a year's leave of absence from St. Olaf College, and set to work. The first few sections of *Giants In The Earth* were written in a cabin in the north woods of Minnesota. Then he felt the need of visiting South Dakota again, to gather fresh material. In midwinter of that year he went abroad, locating temporarily in a cheap immigrant hotel in London, where he worked on the novel steadily. When spring opened in 1924, he went to Norway. There he met Bojer, visiting him at his country home. Bojer was delighted to learn that Rölvaag, of whom he had

heard a great deal, was also working on a novel of the Norwegian-American settlement; the two men exchanged ideas generously. "How do you see the problem?" Rölvaag asked. The answer showed him that Bojer saw it from the viewpoint of Norway, not of America; to him it was mainly a problem of emigration. This greatly relieved Rölvaag's mind, for there was no real conflict; he set to work with renewed energy, and soon finished the first book of *Giants In The Earth.*

In the meanwhile it had been placed with Norwegian publishers—the same firm, by the way, which had lost *Amerika-Breve* twelve years before. It appeared in the latter part of 1924, under the title *I De Dage* (*In Those Days*), a month in advance of Bojer's *Vor Egen Stamme* (*Our Own Tribe*), better known to us by its English title of *The Emigrants.* A year later the second book of the present volume was brought out, under the title *Riket Grundlaegges* (*Founding the Kingdom*).

In Norway these two books have run through many editions; they have been hailed on every hand as something new in Norwegian literature. Swedish and Finnish editions will be published in 1927. Arrangements are being made for a German translation, and the book will probably be off the press in Germany soon after it has appeared in the United States. Rölvaag's vigorous, idiomatic style (which, incidentally, has been the despair of those who have worked over the English translation) is an outstanding topic of recent Scandinavian criticism. The eminent Danish critic, Jörgen Bukdahl, for instance, in his latest work, *Det Skjulte Norge (The Latent Norway),* devotes a whole chapter to Rölvaag and his novels of pioneering in South Dakota. A new name has been added to the literary firmament of Norway.

v

Does Rölvaag's work belong legitimately to Norwegian or to American literature? The problem has unusual and

interesting features. The volume before us deals with American life, and with one of the most characteristically American episodes in our history. It opens on the western plains; its material is altogether American. Yet it was written in Norwegian, and gained its first recognition in Norway. Whatever we may decide, it has already become a part of Norwegian literature. Rölvaag's art seems mainly European; Rölvaag himself, as I have said, is typically American. His life and future are bound up in the New World; yet he will continue to write in a foreign language. Had he been born in America, would his art have been the same? It seems unlikely. On the other hand, had he remained in Norway—had he accepted the boat that fine, clear day in Nordland—how would his art have fared?

But such speculation, after all, is merely idle; these things do not matter. It has not yet been determined, even, what America is, or whether she herself is strictly American. And any sincere art is international. Given the artist, our chief interest lies in trying to fathom the sources of his art, and to recognize its sustaining impulses. What were the forces which have now projected into American letters a realist of the first quality writing in a foreign language a new tale of the founding of America? It is obvious that these forces must have been highly complex and that they will continue to be so throughout his working life; but beyond that we cannot safely go. The rest is a matter of opinion. When I have asked Rölvaag the simple question, Did Norway or America teach you to write? he has invariably thrown up his hands.

The same speculation, in different measure, applies to a considerable quantity of Norwegian-American literary production which as yet our criticism knows nothing about. The Norwegians are a book-loving people; no set of adverse conditions can for long restrain them from expressing themselves in literary form. Here in the Northwest, during the last thirty or forty years, they have built up a distinctive literature, written and published in the Norwegian language, but concerned wholly with American life. Until quite re-

cently, in fact, the region supported a Norwegian fiction magazine.

There are the five substantial novels of Simon Johnson, for instance, with many short stories by the same author. There are the romantic novels of H. A. Foss; and the poetry, short stories, novels, and travelogues of Peer Strömme. There are the polemical and poetical works of O. A. Buslett, obscure and fantastic. There are the three novels and four collections of short stories by the able writer, Waldemar Ager. There is the lyric poetry of Julius B. Baumann and O. S. Sneve, the collected works of both of whom have now been brought out. There are the amazing Biblical dramas of the farmer-poet Jon Norstog—huge tomes with the titles of *Moses,* and *Israel,* and *Saul,* set up by his own hand and published from his own printing press, in a shanty on the prairies of North Dakota—works that reveal the flash of genius now and then, as I am told. Do all these serious efforts belong to Norwegian or to American literature? Their day is nearly done; the present generation of Norse stock has another native language. But it would be of value to have some of this early Norwegian-American product translated into English, to enrich our literature by a pure stream flowing out of the American environment—a stream which, for the general public, lies frozen in the ice of a foreign tongue.

LINCOLN COLCORD.

MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA,
January, 1927.