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SIGRID UNDSET

# BOOKS ABROAD



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## Sigrid Undset and Her Novels on Medieval Life

BY RICHARD BECK

**I**N the untimely passing of Sigrid Undset last summer, not only Norway, but the literary world at large lost one of the greatest writers of our time. As is well known, she was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature for 1928, the third woman to gain that high distinction—a fact which, in itself, is indicative of the prominent position she occupied in the realm of contemporary letters.

Sigrid Undset was born May 22, 1882, in Kallundborg, Denmark, the daughter of a distinguished Norwegian archaeologist and noted writer, and an equally gifted Danish mother of an uncommonly independent mind. At the tender age of two the future poetess moved with her parents to Oslo, where she grew up, and her writings, particularly those of her earlier years, reveal strong influences from the environment of her childhood and youth in the Norwegian capital. Still more fundamental and lasting was the cultural impact which she received in her home, steeped in the atmosphere of ancient Scandinavian and medieval Norwegian lore. She inherited her father's interest in historical subjects, and developed a profound taste for the Icelandic sagas and the traditions of her native land. Her interest and studies in that field later were to bear rich fruit in her monumental historical novels.

At the age of eleven she lost her father, a circumstance which fundamentally changed her future, with the result that at an early age she was

thrown upon her own resources. She attended a commercial college in Oslo, graduating in 1898, and subsequently supported herself for some ten years by doing secretarial work, at the same time continuing her self-education through extensive reading.

Sigrid Undset began her literary career as a writer of stories dealing with modern life. In these she is a thoroughgoing realist, or perhaps one should say a Neo-Realist, fearlessly honest and outspoken. Her first book, *Fru Martha Oulie* (1907), was a noteworthy beginner's book of far more than ordinary promise. It is the story of an unhappy marriage. Here already Undset is, therefore, grappling with the fundamental problem in her modern and medieval novels, "the problem of the relationship between man and woman in marriage," approached from various points of view. She has, however, a firmer grip on her theme and literary style in her next book, *The Happy Age* (1908), two novelettes centering around the life of Oslo office and working girls of the time. Both the stories deal further with married life, the second one being the more notable of the two, in particular because of the robust personality of the heroine, who is one of the main characters in Undset's modern novels.

In 1911 appeared her first great literary success, *Jenny*. It is a daring love story, a very provocative book, which aroused much attention and not a little controversy; the writer's sincerity is, nevertheless, not to be questioned. She is in dead earnest; she is not trifling with a delicate moral situation. The narrative is likewise richer than before, the canvass larger, and the stage peopled by a large number of flesh-and-blood creatures. Moreover, the interpretation of the characters, not least the women, is more penetrating than in the previous works.

This novel in various ways marks an epoch in Sigrid Undset's literary career. It is the last in the series of stories from her younger years, which have as their main theme the clash between the individual's desire for happiness and the duty to that moral demand which life makes upon him. About this time the novelist married the Norwegian painter A. C. Svarstad, from whom she was later divorced.

The moral ideal and its demands are increasingly more in evidence in Sigrid Undset's later works than in her earlier writings, and that is in full harmony with her spiritual development. This can already be seen in her significant collection of short stories published in 1913, containing one of her most masterful stories, and in the novel *Spring* (1914), which constitutes in many respects a contrast to the earlier story *Jenny*, because in this later story by the poetess the central thought is that obedience to the moral law is the basis of lasting happiness in life. In *Spring* there is

an under-current of deep and calm emotion, a warmth and a more optimistic outlook upon life than before.

In Undset's literary essays and collections of short stories from the following years her moral and religious views are expressed still more clearly and vigorously, her growing emphasis is on a positive attitude to eternal values; lasting and creative love builds its house on a religious foundation. In her writings from this period it is easy to see how her religious views become more definite and positive. The existence of God becomes to her reality itself, Christianity the only true foundation for brotherhood and freedom, the Church that institution which is founded on a rock, symbol and interpreter of the supernatural and eternal. Thereby the end of another epoch in the literary career of the novelist has been reached, but the third and most significant period begins with her medieval novels.

Important though her novels on contemporary life are, it is to her great historical novels that Sigrid Undset owes her world fame in the realm of letters and with them she made her unique contribution. She did not find herself, as it were, did not come into the full possession of her powers, until she began writing on medieval themes, which strongly appealed to her taste and sympathies. This interest had, as already indicated, been fostered by her father, the noted archaeologist and professor in that field at the University of Oslo. Back in 1909 she had written a novel dealing with the Saga period, noteworthy both for its portrayal of the historical background and the characterization, and more recently effectively translated several of the Icelandic Sagas into Norwegian. She had also interested herself in early English poetry and legends. Her interest in historical subjects was, therefore, bearing fruit, reaching its high point in her medieval novels, which are rooted deep in her own spiritual development. Her deepening religious feeling has endowed her with that insight and that emotional warmth which make her descriptions of medieval life richly vivid and colorful. The historical foundation is broad and solid. The authoress has painstakingly studied those sources, in verse and prose, which throw light on medieval Norwegian culture: the customs, folkways and outlook upon life of that day, and the result of her effort is commensurate in its truthfulness and penetration.

Sigrid Undset's impressive three-volume historical novel, *Kristin Lavransdatter*, appeared in 1920–22, the three volumes entitled respectively, *The Bridal Wreath*, *The Mistress of Husaby*, and *The Cross*. The scene is laid in Norway during the first half of the fourteenth century. A large number of people play their part, for the stage is both un-

commonly large and the times eventful beyond the ordinary; three characters, however, stand out especially: Kristin, the heroine, Lavrans Björgulfsson, her father, and Erlend Nikulaussön, her husband.

The first volume tells the love story of Kristin and the fascinating but frivolous Erlend, ending with their marriage. She had entered that union against her father's wishes and broken her engagement to the kind and devoted Simon, her childhood friend, and she was bound to pay the price. The second volume continues the story of her and Erlend's tempestuous married life, their happiness not by any means unalloyed. They had wronged others, now they must pay the penalty. Sin brings its own wages, and Sigrid Undset is too great a realist and too much a literary artist to forget that fact. Erlend becomes involved in a political plot, is imprisoned, deprived of his estate and of his right to hold public office.

The third and last volume of the series shows us Kristin and Erlend attempting to begin life again on a different social level. Kristin, as before, holds the center of the stage. This strong-willed woman of a heroic mold loses her loved ones, husband and sons, one after another, and is bereft of her worldly possessions. In her old age and loneliness she gains a new understanding of God's mercy and love, that only there a refuge is to be found from the storms and vicissitudes of human life. The result is that she goes on a pilgrimage to Nidaros, enters a convent as a commoner, and dies there, like thousands of others, of the Black Death; but to the last she had been engaged in nursing and comforting the sick and the suffering, a heroic figure to the end. And even more so in death than in life, memorable in her humility, rich in terms of the wealth of the spirit in the midst of her worldly poverty and lonely state.

This great trilogy is indeed a penetrating study of human relationships, but in even a greater degree the study of a human soul in relation to God, the mighty and absorbing history of the evolution of that soul. At the end of her long trail Kristin stands purified by suffering; she has wrestled with life to arrive at faith, gaining in the same degree in moral strength and tolerance. Her story is a tragedy, but by no means one of defeat; her best self has won the victory.

This remarkable novel remains Sigrid Undset's greatest work, her masterpiece. It won for her the Nobel Prize, and here is indeed much to admire—her truthfulness in picturing the scene of the story, her intimate topographical knowledge, not to forget her fine appreciation of the Norwegian landscape. Admirable as is the external accuracy of the portrayal, its fundamental historical truth is no less astonishing. Undset is thoroughly familiar with all the main phases of Norwegian national life in the

fourteenth century, the political, social, religious, home- and family life. Her ability to describe all this is amazing. As has been correctly said, she makes the entire civilization of that distant day live for her readers.

Yet, truthfully and vividly as she pictures her geographical and historical background, she is primarily interested in her human beings. Her characters are, to be sure, children of their own time; they have their being in a spiritual atmosphere different from our own, but the novelist has the power of revealing the essential and universal humanity of her people. We recognize their kinship to ourselves; we feel with them, rejoice with them, and mourn with them. This universality of appeal is one of the great merits of this unusual novel. In fact, Undset's rare ability to delineate character is one of her greatest gifts. She penetrates to the very heart-core of her people, lays bare the innermost recesses of their souls. No one can readily forget Kristin. "The transformation of the passionate young girl in *The Bridal Wreath* into the worn and humble mother in *The Cross* is carried out with a keen understanding of the human soul and with a realism that is patient and unafraid." (H. G. Topsoe-Jensen).

Sigrid Undset's other major work dealing with medieval life is the four-volume novel, *Olav Audunssøn* (1925–27), the action taking place in Norway during the second half of the thirteenth century. Although this extensive work is generally considered inferior to *Kristin Lavransdatter*, the narrative gift of the authoress finds here in many ways a notable expression, both in characterization and vivid description of medieval life and culture. The central fact of the story is, as before, the inner struggle of the hero, between his willfulness and the demand to submit to a higher power, the will of God and His law.

After the publication of her monumental medieval novels, Sigrid Undset turned again to the writing of stories on contemporary life, with such novels as *The Wild Orchid* (1929) and its sequel *The Burning Bush* (1930), *Ida Elizabeth* (1932), and *The Faithful Wife* (1936), all of them significant in various ways, not least for the deep insight and character-portrayal. Married life in its various aspects and the relationship between parents and children are here penetratingly dealt with and illuminated. Moral problems are, therefore, much in evidence, not least religion, the clash between the flesh and the spirit. Some years before (in 1924) the novelist had embraced the Catholic faith, and some of these books of hers are not free from propaganda in that direction. That can hardly, however, be said of her novel *Ida Elizabeth*, although her moral teachings and demands are there evident, for it is a powerful story, universal

in its application, centering around a whole-souled woman, who sacrifices all on the altar of mother-love.

In her later years, including her sojourn in the United States during the years of World War II, where she had found a refuge after the Nazi invasion of Norway, Sigrid Undset wrote a number of books of interest and merit, consisting, among other things, of reminiscences from her youth, and collections of articles and essays having a cultural value and casting bright light on her spiritual development and her philosophy of life. Repeatedly she emphasizes that the most vital and fundamental elements in European culture are inseparably linked to Christianity; at the same time she fearlessly attacks materialism and totalitarianism.—*University of North Dakota*.



André Gide has been awarded the Goethe medal of the city of Frankfurt on the occasion of the bi-centenary of the German master poet's birthday.

A group of young writers in Honduras have founded a new review, *Proa*, to express their views and ideas.—*Latinoamérica*.

"Perhaps the most typical of the [outstanding literary figures of France's colonial empire] are Léopold Sédar Senghor of French West Africa . . . and Aimé Césaire of Martinique."—Edward A. Jones, in *The French Review*.

Georges Bernanos is coming into his own in America. Pantheon Books has just published his first and still greatest novel, *Under the Sun of Satan*, in a new, truly congenial translation by Harry L. Binsse. There has also been a noticeable increase of scholarly studies on the late French Catholic writer.

The Belgian Government Information Center has issued a series of attractive pamphlets on slick paper, profusely and beautifully illustrated, on such varied aspects of Belgian culture as folklore, literature, painting, sculpture, architecture, music. These contain incisive characterizations of artists, surveys of various periods, and useful analyses.

Two other pamphlets of the series are of particular interest: The excellent one on *Negro Art in the Belgian Congo*, which refutes the idea of its being "primitive" art, defines it as the "fixation of an ecstasy," and summarizes its history and contribution to modern art; and the pamphlet on the bells of Belgium—their making and their rôle in the community's life.

The most unusual charm of this material is the humor, realism, and lack of glorifying the fatherland with which it is presented: the candid statement that the Belgian soul is swayed by sober Christianity and sensual paganism, that the populace is dual in composition—Germanic and Latin, that portrait painters had to compromise between reality and the sitter's mental image of himself.

Two booklets on the growth of the nation and its governmental organization complete this group. They would be helpful to anyone who wants a quick introduction to Belgium or a starting point for more detailed study.

André Gide has at last yielded to the lure of the microphone from which he had so steadfastly shied away. He has now recorded thirty-four improvised "entretiens" on his life and his work for the *Radiodiffusion française* stations which have started broadcasting this series in October.