A Mirror Image of Sigmund Skard? Paul Knaplund and the Role of the Historian between European and American Cultures

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1 Paul Knaplund (1885-1962), long-time Professor of History and Chair at the University of Wisconsin, was one of the great and famous scholars of the British Empire. Yet, a significant amount of his time and energy as a scholar was devoted to historical issues in Norway and to Scandinavian immigrant culture in the US Midwest. This article considers Knaplund’s Norwegian background and his role as cultural intermediary between Norway and the United States. Knaplund was not alone in this endeavour. During his tenure at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (UW), the school became one of the main centers in the United States for Scandinavian Studies. Einar Haugen’s (1906-1984) work teaching Norwegian language courses left a lasting imprint on the curriculum at UW. Merle Curti (1897-1987) not only dominated the study of American literature in the United States but also had a strong interest in immigrant literature and its value around the world. The work of these men, who had direct contact with Norwegian Studies, was in some ways a scholarly mirror image of Sigmund Skard (1903-1995), the famous Norwegian professor of American Studies at the University of Oslo. Professor Skard was one of the pioneers in European American Studies and in interpreting the United States to a Norwegian and a European audience. This essay will concentrate on the role of Knaplund in doing the reverse – interpreting Norway and Scandinavia for the Americans.

2 Knaplund was born on the island of Saltstrung, across the fjord from Bodø, the provincial capital of Nordland. At the age of eleven Knaplund left his home island and visited Bodø for the first time; there, he peddled freshly caught salmon in the streets. His family and many of the people living in these northern areas were fishermen. There were few other opportunities for young men and even less for women, but Knaplund took advantage of
the limited settings for education offered on his island, a one-room grammar school and a small lending library. He read with avid interest some of the standard classical authors of ancient Greece and nineteenth century England, e.g., Herodotus and Dickens. Norwegian newspapers were available to him which sparked his interest in events such as the Spanish American, Boer and Russo-Japanese wars.³

This eager student soon yearned for more education and opportunity than his island could provide. After failing to secure a scholarship to Tromsø Normal School because the program was cancelled, Knaplund decided to emigrate to gain a higher education. Most emigrants to America looked for economic gain and religious freedom and not a chance to gain access to prep schools and colleges. Knaplund was an exception, even though he answered the word “economic” when the immigration officer in Trondheim asked for the reason why he was leaving Norway.⁴

At age twenty-one Knaplund traveled to the United States, following well-worn immigration routes via Hull, Liverpool, and steamship to New York, where he arrived on May 8, 1906. From there he went by rail to Chicago and continued on to his destination at Ostrander, Fillmore county, Minnesota where his father’s cousin, Hans Christ, owned a farm. Hans Christ was the quintessential Norwegian bachelor farmer, having settled in the Fox River Settlement of Norwegian immigrants where he worked as a farm hand until he had enough money to buy horses and some farming equipment. He then became a landowner by moving North and West to Minnesota, and his life pattern followed a route common to many Norwegian immigrants of the era.⁵

After a difficult year on the Hans Christ farm, Paul decided the time had come to continue his education, the original motivation for his emigration. He went to Red Wing Seminary, in the Mississippi River town of Red Wing Minnesota. The school belonged to the Hauge Synod of the Norwegian Lutheran Church of America, and Knaplund graduated with a BA degree six years after enrolling in the eighth grade curriculum. He knew little English when he started, but by the time of his graduation in 1913 he was valedictorian of his class. After borrowing money, Knaplund sought admission to Graduate School at the University of Wisconsin. No holder of a B.A. from Red Wing Seminary had ever been admitted to full time graduate status at UW, and with some reluctance the Registrar and Dean of the Graduate School agreed to recognize his seminary degree.⁶ Many years later, Guy Stanton Ford, editor of the Harper Historical Series, wrote in the preface to Knaplund’s *The British Empire 1815-1939:* “Professor Knaplund, the author of this volume, was that student and I was the new Dean. That was thirty years ago. Needless to say I am glad as editor to have Professor Knaplund come back to my desk once more with all the mature scholarship of those intervening years.”

Knaplund’s descriptions of his boyhood in Norway, his trip to America and his immersion in the Norwegian-American culture described in his *Moorings Old and New: Entries in an Immigrant Log* are quite remarkable. In this volume he describes his own pattern and process of Americanization, which he thought had been achieved by 1936.⁷ Merle Curti (1897-1996), an eminent historian of American intellectual and social history and a colleague and close friend of Knaplund, wrote in a memorial essay that Knaplund’s memoir has for two reasons a unique place in the genre. Firstly, he provided lucid accounts of growing up in Norway and the urge that lay behind emigration. Second, he gave a picture of immigrant rural life in southern Minnesota as well as a portrait of a poor immigrant exercising self-discipline, intelligence and drive to be a successful scholar and citizen. In conclusion, Curti wrote: “So this is not, then, merely a logbook of an
immigrant. It is a personal story in the context of large and significant movements and processes. I think it will take a memorable place in historical no less than in autobiographical writing."

The last half of the nineteenth century witnessed the creation of a trans-Atlantic branch of Norwegian culture. Similar to Knaplund and Curti, Sigmund Skard notes that the work and self-assertion of scholarly immigrants are quite remarkable and strongly influenced the Norwegian peoples who did not emigrate. Skard was especially interested in Curti’s work on immigrants and the effects they had on the image and reputation of America in Europe.

Knaplund’s academic career began and ended at the University of Wisconsin. He earned a Master’s degree there in 1914 and a Doctorate in 1919. Under the direction of Professor A.L.P. Dennis he undertook his first research project: “What were the factors involved in the formation of the Union of South Africa?” This set the stage for his later pioneering work on the socio-economic and political history of the British Empire. Knaplund’s first academic position was as a high school history teacher in Decorah, Iowa, a mainly Norwegian-American community. He was a frequent guest of the Symra Society, a group of Luther College professors, newspaper editors and local literati, many of whom were educated in Norway. The society discussed the history and read the literature of both Norway and immigrant America. These papers on literary and historical topics which dealt with Norwegians both in Norway and America were published in a journal named after a spring flower, Symra. Later in Madison, Wisconsin, Knaplund and his wife were members of a similar group, the Ygdrasil Literary Society, an organization to which Sigmund Skard lectured in 1947 on the Norwegian poet, author and dazzling master of ambiguity, A.O. Vinje.

Eleven years later, in 1964, Einar Haugen of the Scandinavian Studies Department at the University of Wisconsin invited Skard to speak at the Ygdrasil Society as part of their celebrations for the 150th anniversary of the 1814 Norwegian Constitution. Skard gave a series of lectures on the topic “The American Myth and the American Mind”. This was the period when the transatlantic academic connection between Norway and Wisconsin relating to the American impact on Europe was in full bloom. In his invitation to Skard Haugen wrote: “Your lecture topics are superb and exactly what we want”. Interestingly, Haugen, the linguist, had read some of Skard’s earlier manuscripts with a critical eye. Haugen mentioned to Skard that it was inappropriate for him to use the word “Nordic” when referring to Scandinavia. Haugen wrote: “Nordic has unfortunate associations of race and is roughly equivalent to Aryan”.

How did Knaplund see the position of Norway in the mid-twentieth century? The outbreak of war in 1939 and the subsequent German invasion of Norway in 1940 greatly affected Paul Knaplund. Bodø was destroyed by German bombers on May 29th, 1940. Knaplund, under the alias ‘Olav Norseman’, asked in a short article ‘One Nazi Victory’: “Whence had the agents of destruction come? Whom did they represent?” The author’s use of a pseudonym in this case probably was to protect his relatives in Norway from Nazi harassment. For Knaplund the social, cultural, and economic linkages between Norway and Germany were so extensive that the destruction wrought by the German invasion was incomprehensible.

In 1950 Knaplund wrote an article entitled “Norway between East and West” in The Quarterly Review, in which he continued his interest in examining Norway’s place between the great powers. The creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in 1949, which
Norway joined as a founder member, inspired Knaplund to review the entire history of Norwegian diplomacy, going back to the ninth century Norse explorer Othere who explored North Cape, Lapland and White Sea. Long before the Tsars built up the Muscovite Empire, Finns and Permians harried both coastal and inland sections of Norway north of the Arctic Circle. Some of the raids are chronicled but many exist as “folk tales” handed down by oral tradition. Knaplund concluded that the people of northern Norway had “an inborn fear of an attack from the East.” During the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, relatively little attention was paid by the great powers to the northern areas. There was some placement in 1751 of boundary markers between Swedish and Finnish territory, but it was only in 1826 that the Norwegian-Russian border was defined. In the 1830’s John Rice Crowe, British vice counsel at Hammerfest, had a different idea about the value of the “North Country”. He traveled back to London and convinced Foreign Secretary Lord Palmerston that Finnmark was of great strategic importance for raw materials and fish. In 1855 Palmerston, by then Prime Minister and at war with Russia in the Crimea, joined France to guarantee protection for both northern Norway and Sweden from Russian encroachment. This treaty remained in force until 1905, the year of dissolution of the union between Norway and Sweden. Three decades later the Hitler-Stalin Non Aggression Pact of 1939 and the Russo-Finnish war of 1940 therefore aroused many old fears amongst the Norwegians.

In this context, Knaplund’s comment on the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union at first sight seems reasonable: “Hitler’s invasion of Russia at first brought hope to Norway. For the time being it drew the countries together.” After the defeat of Germany there was a brief period of mutual trust between Norway and the Soviet Union, but since Norwegian economic and political well-being was linked to the West it was understandable that it looked in that direction for protection. Knaplund concluded: “As in the days of Othere, northern Norway is still a ‘mark’ between East and West.” Knaplund shared this position with Skard, who saw that America was going to be the pillar of freedom in the East-West struggle for supremacy.

If had Knaplund been alive to see the whole of the Vietnam war he would almost certainly have been a critic. UW’s History Department was traditionally left-leaning and an important forum of progressive and socialist thought. Nevertheless, it is not as if Knaplund associated closely with the key figure in that scene, William Appleman Williams, whose book The Tragedy of American Diplomacy appeared in 1959. On the other side of the ocean Professor Skard and his colleagues in American Studies at the university of Oslo were early critics of the Vietnam war, expressing their indignation in letters to the American Embassy in Oslo and to Norwegian newspapers. In a recent essay Øyvind Gullikson, a former student of Sigmund Skard’s and now a professor at Tellmark College in Norway, noted how opposition to the Vietnam War combined with a disgust of American pop culture to taint the dream of a better society, a dream which had been fuelled by Norwegian-American cultural interaction. In this situation, according to Gullikson, the the growth of academic studies on American literature and culture in Norway promoted by Skard and others fulfilled an essential function to keep that dream alive.

In 1930, Knaplund was named to the board of editors of Norwegian Studies and Records, the publication series of the Norwegian American Historical Association. His first contribution to the Records was the article ‘Norwegians in the Selkirk Settlement 1815-1870’, one of his earliest contributions to Norwegian-American immigration history.
Knaplund's article on the Selkirk settlement stemmed from two impulses. Firstly, he was interested in settlement patterns in North America, in this case Canada. Secondly, he was always intrigued with anyone (such as Lord Selkirk) who offered a solution to the vexatious Irish problem, in this case by recruiting poor Irishmen to settle in Canada. However, Lord Selkirk believed the best workers for the Hudson's Bay Company were people with experience as woodsmen, inured to the rigours of a northern climate, strong, resourceful and receptive to discipline. As a result, it was agreed that the best source of such types was not Ireland, but Norway and Sweden. In early 1814, the directors of the Hudson's Bay Company voted to hire Norwegian and Swedish laborers and transport them to North America. These men were probably sailors or soldiers who had been interned or imprisoned during the Napoleonic wars. They worked at the York Factory (a trading post) near the southeastern shore of Hudson's Bay. One of these men, Peter Dahl, was later to become a very prosperous farmer in the Red River Valley in Manitoba. Knaplund concluded his article by determining that Peter Dahl was the first Norwegian in an area later settled by many of his countrymen, “an intrepid pioneer worthy of being remembered in the annals of Norwegians in America.”

Continuing his theme of studying the reasons behind immigration and the effects it could have on social and cultural attitudes, Knaplund went on to write about Hans Tambs Lyche (1885—1898). Knaplund noted English and Norwegian elites often viewed colonials in an unfavorable light, seeing them as crude, boring, lacking in spirituality and possessing little culture. Hans Lyche, engineer, Unitarian minister, and magazine editor was born in Fredrikstad, Norway and later emigrated to the United States. Lyche developed a very favourable view of Americans during his long stay in America, coming to know people of all classes from railroad workers to graduates of Harvard Divinity School. In 1892, he returned to Norway and began editing a periodical, *Kringsjaa*, which was mainly devoted to telling Norwegians about American life and history. *Kringsjaa* had at one point over five-thousand subscribers, and Skard later described Lyche as one of the most distinctive of the transatlantic cultural intermediaries between Norway and America.

In 1965 a posthumous article by Knaplund was published on Knute Hamsun in the periodical *Modern Age*. Knaplund was well acquainted with works of the famous novelist of Norwegian culture and winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, but there were other connections besides literary interest. Both had lived in or near Bodø, both were roughly of the same generation, both had worked briefly on farms in the American Midwest. However, the cause for Knaplund to write the article had to do with unravelling the enigma of Hamsun’s behavior during the period 1940-1945. Hamsun praised Hitler and the Nazis, a strange move for someone who had previously criticized the revered nationalistic poet Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson for not being sufficiently patriotic to his country’s cause during the constitutional struggle with Sweden. What were Hamsun’s motivations during World War II?

In 1945 Hamsun underwent a lengthy psychiatric exam and was charged and tried for treason two years later. He successfully avoided his conviction and the death sentence by pleading the infirmities of old age, loss of sight and hearing. Yet Knaplund notes that Hamsun, at age 91 in 1950, published a novel *On Weed Choked Paths* (*Paa Gjengrodde Stier*) that “proves conclusively that his mental powers were unimpaired.” Knaplund praised the author’s literary description of the Arctic north and otherwise forgotten details of Hamsun’s life experience, such as working as a lowly hired man on a farm in North Dakota. But the question remained: “How could such a gifted portrayer of the soul and
will of humanity stray so far in supporting Nazism?” Trying to answer this, Knaplund described the period between the two world wars as an epoch of mass bewilderment when the old moral order was collapsing. Marxist and fascist dictatorships in Germany, Italy, Japan and the Soviet Union seemed to be the true future. Hamsun believed that Nazism was a way out of the self-indulgence and social anarchy of Western democracies. At the same time Hamsun had strong individualistic ideas which were antithetical with Nazism. Knaplund could only suggest that his complex personality may have been created by some psychological stress and trauma as young man, when he came under the control of a violent and exploitative uncle."

Knaplund goes further in his apologetics by commenting on how great writers often are mistaken when they evaluate political leaders, but “they have been forgiven. Something of the same kind of thing may happen in Knute Hamsun’s case—his political vagaries overlooked, the novels and poems of a truly creative author, ‘a giant among men’ remembered.” It is clear that Hamsun was important enough for someone like Knaplund that he should be rehabilitated after the war as a great cultural figure, whatever his misguided political standpoints may have been. Sigmund Skard basically agreed, Seeing Hamsun as one of the most important intermediaries between Norwegian and American culture.

Another scholarly and literary man of distinction born in Wisconsin of Norwegian ancestry, Rasmus B. Anderson (1846-1936), attracted the serious attention of both Paul Knaplund and Sigmund Skard. In 1954 Knaplund published a long article on Anderson, the famed scholar and diplomat who had been born of Norwegian immigrant parents in Dane County, Wisconsin. On Anderson’s death in 1936 the Wisconsin State Journal published a twenty-two page obituary. In 1976 Skard, in his *The United States in Norwegian History* recounts his high esteem for Anderson. Why did Knaplund and Skard focus on Anderson? Anderson’s personality was incredibly complex and clearly an intriguing challenge for scholars to interpret. Knaplund wrote:

> In intellect and character Anderson was a compound of many traits, strangely mixed. An eager student, a resourceful writer, an adroit conversationalist, he explored numerous fields. He could be frank as well as secretive, rash and tenacious, impulsive and yet had an eye for the main chance. A born crusader, he was fearless, pugnacious, and zealous. Although extremely self-centered and sometimes veneful, he could be both interesting and winsome in social intercourse. On many points Anderson qualified for a niche among those labeled ‘irregularly great’.

Knaplund dwelt at some length on Anderson’s expulsion from Luther College in Decorah Iowa in 1865. Anderson was probably the only student ever expelled from Luther College for non-academic or moral reasons. He was a constant complainer, resented harsh living conditions at the college, and did not agree with President Laur Larsen’s intellectual views on slavery, since for Anderson the issue was whether or not it had any Biblical legitimacy. In 1869 Anderson began a fourteen year affiliation with the University of Wisconsin where he taught ancient languages and a variety of subjects. He also introduced courses in the Norwegian language and in 1875 a chair was established in Scandinavian languages. Anderson was a key figure in introducing and expanding the study of Scandinavian culture in America, and this, probably more than anything, explains Knaplund’s interest in him.

Knaplund concluded about Anderson: “Above all else, men of Norse blood ought not to consider themselves second-class citizens; rather they should walk upright, with great
courage and self-respect, and with firm steps on life’s highway.” Skard also fully recognised Anderson’s indefatigable work spreading Norwegian culture at the University of Wisconsin and beyond, and Anderson’s constant reminding to his fellow Americans of the original encounter with America by the Norsemen.27

22 Knaplund is most renowned as a scholar of the British Empire. In his ‘Memorial Essays’ Graham quoted Knaplund’s vision of the importance of the Empire for spreading values of justice, equality and prosperity: “If the commonwealth falls because it is dedicated to the cause of freedom and human rights, nothing in its history will become it so well as its end.”28 Yet any in-depth review of Knaplund’s many publications on Scandinavian history, culture and literature reveals a valuable body of research into immigrant cultures and experiences, and it is arguably on that terrain that he deserves more credit.

23 As an immigrant himself Knaplund overcame many hurdles from fisherman to farmer in Minnesota to student in Wisconsin and, ultimately, a Guggenheim fellowship for research in England. By his own example Knaplund set the standards for many of his students and future historians in his insistence on a careful analysis of primary sources. Knaplund played a key role at the University of Wisconsin in passing on his immigrant experience to others, contributing to the combination of Norwegian and American cultures along the way. At UW he was also the foremost candidate for hosting eminent Norwegian visitors such as Carl Hambro, president of the Storting (Norwegian Parliament) and an exile in 1940, and Trygve Lie, the first UN Secretary-General, in 1949.29 Overall, Knaplund played a role in Wisconsin similar to that played by Skard in Oslo, both being scholars interpreting another culture for their immediate academic environment and beyond. But while Skard was intrigued enough in the United States to devote his entire life to studying it, Knaplund went further by emigrating to that country, working himself up to a position of some stature, and along the way immersing himself in the local culture. But Knaplund never abandoned his identity as Norwegian, and as his bibliography demonstrates, he was constantly drawn to understanding those who also functioned as intellectual ‘bridges’ between the different cultures of Norway and America, something he himself strove to be.

NOTES
1. Olav Norseman (pseudonym), ‘One Nazi Victory,’ The University of Toronto Quarterly, 11 (April 1942), 280.
3. Ibid. 72.
4. Ibid., 135.
5. Ibid., 133-153, 169. The oral history tapes of Dorothy Knaplund provide a lot of material about her husband and his work as a scholar, teacher and administrator. She had been a student in several of his history classes. When they decided to marry, her parents thought he was a low status Norwegian “foreigner”. On their wedding trip to Norway Paul
and Dorothy Knaplund visited his many relatives in Bodø. Her taped interviews describe
the simple homespun peasant life of her husband’s relatives. Their home reflected the
living conditions of a small landholder (bønder) common in pre-industrial Europe. They
lived (in the 1920’s) without electricity, wove their clothing and carried water for
domestic use. Dorothy Knaplund, Interview 62, Tape 1, 1977, University of Wisconsin–
Madison Archives Oral History Project.

6. Ibid. 224. A few months earlier the University of Minnesota had denied him entry into
their Graduate School, because the Dean had never heard of Red Wing Seminary.

1941), xii.

8. Dorothy Knaplund, Interview 62, Tape 4, University of Wisconsin–Madison Archives
Oral History Project.

9. Merle Curti, forward in *Paul Knaplund* (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin,
1957), viii. This is a volume of memorial essays honoring Knaplund. See Sigmund Skard,
*The United States in Norwegian History* (Westport Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1976), 78,
206.

from Diplomatic Correspondence* (Kjeldeskriftfondeet: Oslo, 1952).

11. Symra: Decorah-posten’d trykkeri, Decorah, Iowa (1905-1914). The complete collection is
in Preus Library, Luther College, Decorah, Iowa.

12. Knaplund, *Moorings*, 228. Also see Einar Haugen to Sigmund Skard, 15 March 1957, in
University of Wisconsin-Madison Archives, Madison, Wisconsin. The various letters in the
UW- Madison Archives indicate a very close friendship between Einar Haugen and
Sigmund Skard. Haugen was even a godfather for one of Skard’s five children. There did
not appear to be any letters in the Archives from Knaplund to Skard or Skard to
Knaplund.

13. Einar Haugen to Sigmund Skard, 11 February 1958 and 28 February 1957, University of
Wisconsin-Madison Archives, Madison, Wisconsin.

14. Knaplund (Olav Norseman), ‘One Nazi Victory’, 280-286. World War II was a key
moment when Sigmund Skard, who was living in exile in the United States during the
war, and Paul Knaplund, living in Madison, Wisconsin, both expressed their loyalty to
Norway. Skard published in the August 5, 1941 edition of the *Decorah-Posten*, a prominent
Norwegian language Newspaper in Decorah, Iowa, the article ‘Til Kong Haaken, 3 August,
1941’ praising the valor of King Haakon in refusing to surrender to the Nazi invaders.

15. Paul Knaplund, ‘Norway between East and West,’ *The Quarterly Review* 288 (October
1950), 548.

16. Ibid., 548, 555-556. See also Skard, *The United States*, 192.

17. Øyvin Gullikson, ‘Tunnel of Love: American Influences on Norwegian Culture,’ in Poul
Houve and Sven Hakon Rossel, eds., *Images of America in Scandinavia* (Rodopi: Amsterdam,
1998) 101-127. Students of Knaplund also spread out within the university system. Dr.
Kenneth Bjork became a distinguished professor of Norwegian American history at St.
Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota. Dr. Martin L. Cole became a prominent educational
leader colleges founded by Norwegian immigrants such as Augustana College in Sioux
Falls, South Dakota, and St. Olaf. He went on to become president of Texas Lutheran
College in Seguin, Texas, a school with both Norwegian and German roots.

18. Paul Knaplund, ‘Norwegians in the Selkirk Settlement, 1815-1870,’ *Norwegian American
Studies and Records* 6 (1931), 3, 7, 11.
22. Ibid., 167-169.
23. Ibid., 173; Skard, *The United States*, 115-118.
26. Ibid., 40.
27. Ibid., 43. Also see Skard, *The United States*, 79
29. Dorothy Knaplund, Interview 62, Tape 3, University of Wisconsin Oral History Project.

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