

Books in Northern Europe

By Sigrid Undset



—Sketch by Newman Sudduth.

Sigrid Undset, the Norwegian novelist, is one of the world's great writers. She has been publishing since 1907 and is an authority on Scandinavian history and literature. In 1928 her great novel of medieval Scandinavia won the Nobel Prize for literature. During the war Mme. Undset fled from her country, fearing that, if she were captured by the Germans, pro-Nazi broadcasts would be given as if coming from her. She spent some of the exile in the United States. One of her sons was killed in the defense of Norway. She has now returned to her home and has resumed her literary work. The accompanying story was written exclusively for *The Star*.

LILLEHAMMER, NORWAY. DURING the war the literary life of the three Nordic countries unfolded under very different conditions. Of course, this has also affected the postwar situation profoundly.

In Sweden
If the Swedish censorship supervising the neutrality of the press—not always equally severely—also meddled with the publishing business, at least it was kept quiet or applied with some liberality. It did not prevent the publication of Wilhelm Moberg's novel "Ride This Night" (translated in America), a warning against giving in to injustice, slightly disguised as a historical romance, or of Eyvind Johnson's tale of "Krilon," an imaginative attempt to tell, in terms of a conspiracy against the independence of the small people of Sweden by a ruthless and rather mysterious concern, contemporary history about the battle between individual liberty and dignity and totalitarianism. Even books about the war in Norway and some books by Norwegian refugees appeared. So in Sweden literary life after the peace went along very much on the old lines.

"Libraries"—of a type like Everyman's Library or the Modern Library—have a long and honorable history in Sweden. Since way back, university circles, the powerful Labor Party and groups on a more or less businesslike basis have edited series of books on popular science, social questions and editions of the classics as well as series of "best novels"—selections from world literature. Neither the war nor the peace interrupted this work of public education. The Swedes were always alert to keep in touch with literary events abroad and to translate important novelties, from best sellers to outstanding works of scholarship and science. Important American books usually soon appeared in Swedish. After the peace also French literature, also books published secretly by the underground, are again being translated.

Big books on history, natural science and biography are probably read—and bought—more widely in Sweden than anywhere else. Fat or slender volumes of poetry too—the great and glorious tradition of Swedish verse has for generations been the pride and delight of the people. A number of young poets, some of whom seem talented, promise that this tradition will be carried on.

As usual, also, a number of novels appeared last year, none of which, however, seem very important. Culture, taste and a vivid awareness of social and psychological problems are evident, but the treatment of the human element usually is lacking in vigor and depth—maybe

there is a connection between the lyrical and rhetorical trend in Swedish literature and the anemic complexion of Swedish novels.

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In Denmark

IN DENMARK during the occupation a few plays and novels appeared only to be suppressed by the censorship as soon as they were out—and already widely distributed. This happened to Kai Munk's play, "Niels Ebbeson" and Kelvin Lindemann's novel, "A Cradle of Free Men." Mr. Lindemann gave his royalties to the underground and had to flee into Sweden. The novel, another of these works where a contemporary topic has been disguised as history, now of course has been reprinted, and so have some of the translations of anti-Nazi books which the Danish underground secretly made and distributed in stenciled copies. Nevertheless, Danish authors enjoyed some freedom. Poems outspokenly patriotic could appear and were cherished by the whole nation. The promises of the "visitors" of a blissful future for Denmark impressed very few Danish authors. These few now are paying the penalty for their sins.

Kai Munk, the playwright-parson, had professed his sympathy for dictatorship when Hitler entered the stage. He was cured definitely when the persecution of Jews in 1938 revolted the Nordic nations. During the occupation he boldly fought for his faith and his mother country, and the Germans, feeling very uncomfortable about this stormy petrel of a parson, most brutally and unwisely had him assassinated. The Gestapo did to Kai Munk what his writings never could have done, making his name one of lasting fame and a rallying point of Danish will to resist the new paganism and the Germans. Since the peace a literature about Kai Munk has grown up which already in volume surpasses his own considerable output.

Books about the experience of individuals or groups, or about the consequences of the occupation to aides of the national life, are telling what the Danes had to keep silent about for five long years. As almost everywhere else the interest in this kind of literature may be flagging, and as to the works putting forth proposals or debate about the problems of the near or remote future, they seem to suffer the usual fate of such writing—they are mostly read by those who already belong to the author's own

political or religious denomination, rarely by those he wants to convert.

Among the novelists and poets a few new names have come to the forefront, such as Tove Ditlevsen, whose love lyrics and sensitive novels about very young girls have a tender feminine charm.

In Norway

IN NORWAY, Germans and Quislings meddled with a will, to tune literature into harmony with their "New Order." Some of the publishers were marched off to concentration camps, the publishing houses were given Nazi "advisers" or directors—and so next to no new books were published, in spite of the fact that during the mental blackout the appetite of the people for reading was tremendous. So the Norwegian classics were reprinted, and the bookstores and publishers' stores cleaned out, books banned by the Germans selling under the counter. The authors wrote for their desk drawers, biding their time. Some new publishing houses were started by the men of the "New Order," but as the Quislings and Germans were not a reading lot and nobody else wanted to buy their output, no subsidies from above could prevent their wasting away. Of the handful of Norwegian authors who joined the Nazis, everybody except Knut Hamsun is today as if he had never lived.

Immediately after the liberation only the shortage of material set a limit to the output of new books. With money on their hands and not a thing to buy without rationing points except books and paintings, people bought books and paintings. Everything published was sold out in no time, and for books of more than ephemeral interest, like the volumes of our two great poets, Nordahl Grieg, who was killed in an air raid over Berlin, and Arnulf Overland, immured for three years in Sachsenhausen, you had to enter your bookseller's list and wait patiently, sometimes for months. Also several volumes of drawings and sketches made on toilet paper and smuggled out of Grini concentration camp were snatched away as soon as they were printed.

The first intense interest in books about the war has fallen off somewhat, yet still a number are published—about the campaign in Norway, the secret war of the underground, the rebirth of our navy and air force, and also war books from other countries, among them some American, such as "Queens Die Proudly." Probably only a few of these will be of lasting interest, such as Judge Cappelen's restrained and terrible account of his experience with the Gestapo and his life in an extermination camp, or Max Manus' story of his adventures as a commando soldier. An Oslo boy in spite of his foreign name, Manus is as slangy as Damon Runyon, writing frankly about the daredevil deeds he had to perform in spite of being in a blue funk, only they had to be done; enthusiastically praising his comrades and the helpers from all classes of the people, who willingly risked their lives to aid the commandos. In his poignant novel, "Voyagers for England," Sigurd Evensmo tells about 18 young Norwegians who tried to cross the Atlantic to join our fighting forces in England, but were betrayed and finally executed. Evensmo, who was one of the doomed band, escaped the firing squad only because the Gestapo also had other bones to pick with him. The beauty of the book is the faith of these boys that the love of life, human integrity and goodness, faced with those whose passion is death and destruction, will never be conquered, no matter how many men may have to die for it.

Volumes of the speeches of Churchill and Roosevelt; biographies, for instance of De Gaulle, and works on the atomic bomb, on world politics and on reconstruction appear almost daily.

During the occupation Norway experienced a flowering of poetry. Many of the poems which originally passed from hand to hand secretly may in time become part of our national literature. From the drawers of the authors on strike the manuscripts have emerged. Important is Johan Falkberget's second volume of a serial about a mining village in the 17th century, "The Bread of



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