



Ole Edvart Rølvaag

Dakota Images

Both Norway and the United States claim the literary talents of Ole Edvart Rølvaag. His novels were written in Norwegian about Norwegians, but, like his masterpiece *Giants in the Earth*, which takes place in South Dakota, they have their settings in this country.

Rølvaag was born on 22 April 1876 on the island of Dønna, located just below the Arctic Circle in Norway. He went to school until he was fifteen and then joined the local fishing fleet. Five years later, he declined an offer to command a fishing boat and, instead, used a ticket sent by an uncle in America to emigrate to Elk Point, South Dakota. After laboring for two years on his uncle's farm, he enrolled at Augustana Academy, a Lutheran preparatory school in Canton, South Dakota. In 1905, at the age of twenty-nine, he graduated with honors from Saint Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota. After spending a year at the university in Oslo, Norway, Rølvaag returned to join the faculty at Saint Olaf, where he remained throughout his career. In 1908, the same year he became a naturalized citizen, he married Jennie Berdahl, the daughter of one of the first Norwegian immigrants to settle in eastern South Dakota.

By the time he left Augustana Academy, Rølvaag had decided that preserving Norwegian culture and language among immigrants and their descendants should be his life mission. Later, at Saint Olaf, he taught Norwegian language and literature, chaired the Norwegian department, wrote several Norwegian textbooks, and helped form the Norwegian-American Historical Association. Writing his seven novels consumed much of Rølvaag's remaining time.

The inner struggle of the immigrant and the consequences of pulling up one's cultural roots are themes that pervade Rølvaag's works, but they are expressed most eloquently in *Giants in the Earth* (English ed., 1927). Rølvaag drew heavily on the experiences of his father-in-law to tell the classic story of a group of Norwegian homesteaders in Dakota Territory. He continued the saga in two other novels, *Peder Victorious* (1929) and *Their Father's God* (1931). The English translation of the latter was completed just before Rølvaag died from a lifelong heart ailment on 5 November 1931 at the age of fifty-three.

by JANET LIVELY

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