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Peter Graves and Arne Kruse (eds.)

# HAMSUN IN EDINBURGH

Papers Read at the  
Conference in Edinburgh  
1997



Hamsun-Selskapet  
1998

Arne Kruse

## Hamsun and Britain

Many of the posters advertising this Hamsun seminar in Edinburgh were systematically defaced with the words 'He was a Nazi!' That reputation is what takes precedence over almost everything else known about Hamsun. If the British know anything at all about the Second World War in Norway, they are likely to know one or perhaps two names: not, unfortunately, the names of any of the many people who put up a resistance to the German occupation, but those of the two most prominent collaborators with the German occupiers. Vidkun Quisling, whose surname has entered the English language as a synonym for traitor, has become internationally renowned as a political collaborator with the German Nazis. The other name the world connects with the occupation of Norway is that of Knut Hamsun, the famous author who provided the Germans with an intellectual alibi for the occupation of his own country.

There can be no doubt that many people are alienated from Hamsun's works by his Nazi sympathies - in Norway as in the rest of the world. Nevertheless, in central and eastern Europe Knut Hamsun is well known as an author and not just as a Nazi sympathiser. That is not the case in Great Britain. The



Drawing by Karl Erik Harr

remarkable lack of interest in his work in this country cannot simply be explained by the understandable aversion to his political leanings. In his contribution to the conference Peter Graves shows that there are much older, deeper and specifically British cultural reasons for it. Nor can we use Hamsun's failure to break through in Britain to explain his own expressly anti-British views. Vanity is, of course, a human weakness and even an otherwise invulnerable intellectual warrior like Hamsun cannot have been unaffected by the fact that his books were both praised and sold very well in Germany whereas they were coldly ignored in Great Britain. That, no doubt, reinforced his anglophobia but its roots lie much farther back in time, partly in his own childhood and youth and partly in the Norwegian society he grew up in.

There are those who maintain that Hamsun's anglophobia is in itself the motivation for his support for the Nazis but such an explanation is far too simple. His loyalty towards Germany does not only rest on the negative basis of loyalty towards the enemy of England and one can well imagine it having existed quite independently of his view of England.

One reason is that Hamsun, as an admirer of Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, was undoubtedly influenced by Bjørnson's pan-Germanism but of equal importance for Hamsun was the fact that Germany was traditionally the connecting link between Scandinavia and the continent. Towards the end of the 19th century Germany had also become a traditional home from home for many young Scandinavian artists, Edvard Munch

and August Strindberg to name but two. It was where many Scandinavian artists achieved their international breakthrough and many of them lived there for shorter or longer periods: Henrik Ibsen, for instance, lived in Germany for many years, wrote some of his best known plays there, and felt at home. And, in the wake of Henrik Ibsen and Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, there was a particular interest in Scandinavian art there - something that Hamsun could clearly gain advantage from. Great Britain has never played anything like the role Germany has played in Scandinavian intellectual life, as a cultural market, as a refuge and as an intermediary. Nevertheless, in the political sphere, Britain has always been close to the Scandinavians - this has been particularly true of the Norwegians, and never more so than in the present century. The sympathies of the Norwegian people during both World Wars lay fairly unanimously on the British side, but even during the First World War Hamsun marked out his position on the wrong side by sympathising with the Germans.

Around about 1910 Hamsun developed the views that he would adhere to for the rest of his life. He thought that Germany, as a young nation, had naturally determined demands to be allowed to develop - as is always the way with youth, even if it is at the expense of its elders, who will suffer if they stand in the way. In Hamsun's political mythology Great Britain represents the decrepit old man who stands in the way of the exuberant development of youth.

Knut Hamsun's anti-democratic stance is much older than

Nazism as a political ideology but, when Nazism takes form as an ideology, his opinions - of which he had given us forewarning as early as his first book *On the Cultural Life of Modern America* (Fra det moderne Amerikas Aandsliv, 1889) - coincide with the reactionary attitude of the Nazis towards modern industrial capitalism. And the Nazis' emphasis on youth and the natural right of the life-force to grow and develop struck a chord with Hamsun.

When they feel it necessary, human beings have an amazing ability to simplify, to view things in black and white, to see what they want to see and to shut their eyes to what they do not want to see. Hamsun chose not to see the Nazis' book-burnings and persecution of those who thought differently, but he was fond of imagining that England had never played anything but a negative role in world history. Hamsun did not share Hitler's hatred of the Jews: for Hamsun, it was the Englishman not the Jew who was the real scapegoat of history.

Hamsun's speech to the journalists congress in Vienna in 1943 revolves completely around England and the negative part that country has played throughout the ages. He expresses his enormous frustration that Englishmen are so well-liked everywhere, not least in his own homeland, whereas what people ought to do, he says, is to see through the falseness of the English and recognise that their ability to ingratiate themselves is part of a cynical power game. The last sentence of his speech was splashed across the front pages of

newspapers throughout the whole of German-occupied Europe: 'England to her knees!' The speech, which paradoxically enough was delivered in English since Hamsun never mastered German, began with his personal feelings about England:

I am deeply and profoundly anti-English, anti-British, and I can never remember ever being anything else. I do not announce this as any particular merit on my part but simply as my point of view. I happened to travel abroad from my own country quite early and I met foreigners, including Englishmen. I read a little of course, I observed a little, and I tried to think about what I saw. I found it very strange indeed that people preferred Englishmen to people of other nationalities, as was often the case. In fact, more often than not it was the rule, particularly among seamen. I did not understand this attitude. For my part I have never come across less lovable people than the English - so self-centred, so arrogant, so exclusive. Later - having grown up and come home again - I was to find that most of my fellow-countrymen preferred the English to any other people in Europe: and they do so to this day.

Is it the case that my dear fellow-countrymen cannot read and cannot think? Of course, we have had schools and books, we have had the chance to get to know the British directly and their history and bloody conducts all over the Earth - but still we always sat back and kept the British in our hearts.

Is it possible to explain this? Is it possible to understand it?

This, incidentally, is not the only time he despairs at his fellow-countrymen's sympathy for the British.

As an author in general, perhaps, but not least as a basically romantic author, Hamsun has a strained relationship with logical-empirical thought. It is in the nature of literature, not least in the nature of romantic literature, that the author must become a prey to his own fantasy and his own fancies - however fleeting and unfounded these may be. Irrational fancy was, in fact, nothing less than Hamsun's literary programme and he made great play with proclaiming it in the years around 1890. He travelled around Norway and propounded the message that literature must find expression for 'the tender fantasy life held under a magnifying glass, these wanderings of thought and feeling out into the blue yonder, unmeasured and invisible journeys with the mind and heart, the strange activities of the nerves, the whisper of the blood, the prayers of the bones, the whole unconscious life of the soul.'

His ethic as an artist laid the foundations of a literature which pointed in new directions. But the idiosyncracies were also an integral part of Hamsun as an individual and as a writer, a part of his way of thinking and his way of being - they were, indeed, a matter of honour.

Hamsun worships some of his own prejudices with manic pride, as inseparable parts of his world of thought. They appear in the literature he creates and they are expressed in the form of statements, essays and contributions to debate. In Norwegian public life he became to a great extent, like Johan Nagel in *Mysterier* (Mysterier, 1892), one of the outsiders of

existence, someone who stands outside all groupings and communities of opinion, someone who takes up a position on the periphery of what are generally considered to be the important questions in society and who stubbornly goes his own way. There were a certain number of things that Hamsun considered to be important and he was utterly consistent about them in his novels, essays and letters: among them was the relationship between Germany and England. The United States was another nation that concerned him, naturally enough since he actually knew that country from his own experience. What Hamsun writes about the USA is certainly critical but, unlike his criticism of England, it is criticism based to some extent on fact - in contrast to the fundamentally irrational hatred he shows for England. Hamsun only visited England once. That was when he travelled across the country from west to east on his homeward journey from the transatlantic liner. He did not know any British people personally. He received little by way of a reaction to his books from Britain. He scarcely read any British books or newspapers. And when one knows little or nothing about a nation it is all the easier to ascribe to that nation all the characteristics one wants to - or those that will match the view of the world one wants to see.

So when we stepped into the lion's den and held a seminar about Knut Hamsun with the idea of adding some nuances to the rather one-sided British view of the author, we were certainly not doing so in the spirit of the author himself.

Prejudices are always sweeping and general - in the world of prejudices there is no room for nuances. The fact that the seminar was held in Edinburgh, in Scotland, reminds us of that because Hamsun always equates England and Great Britain; if that is possible, he knew even less about Scotland than about England.

The aim of the seminar was to bring Hamsun to an English language audience. It was not our intention to sell old wares under a new name. It was not our intention to excuse his support for the Nazis by saying that he was old and of unsound mind or by saying that we must forget the insufferable political Hamsun and remember instead Hamsun the literary genius. On the contrary, there is good reason to emphasise the absolute consistency in Hamsun's views from the beginning of his literary career to his death, to stress the coherence and unity that exists between Hamsun as a political figure and as a literary figure. In that way we can see and analyse Knut Hamsun - since he lived such a long life - as a man who carried the intellectual baggage of one century into a new century, the intellectual baggage which in its utter consistency made Hamsun one of the very few intellectual defenders of Adolf Hitler. We hope that this seminar, by throwing light on as many aspects as possible of that very complex human being Knut Hamsun, will demonstrate the interesting part played by Hamsun in the intellectual life of Europe. We also hope that it might help to open British eyes to the works of an unbelievably exciting author.