

**Building ethnic identity among Norwegian-Americans: A comparative view on how Norwegian ethnicity is dealt with in Nordahl Rolfsen's reader *Boken om Norge* (1913-1915) and Ole Edvart Rølvaag's *Norsk Læsebok* (1919-1925).**

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Nordahl Rolfsen is a central figure in the Norwegian school history due to his reader *Lesebok for folkeskolen* (1892–95), which dominated the Norwegian public school from the late 1800s and towards the 1950s. Less known is that Rolfsen in the period between 1913 and 1915 compiled a special reader for Norwegians in America, *Boken om Norge*, in five volumes. As far as we know, this is in fact the first reader published in Norwegian which aimed at multilingual readers. Four of these five volumes were based on material from *Lesebok for folkeskolen*, while the last volume, *Norway in America* (1915), was completely newly written and specially adapted for Norwegian-Americans. Through *Lesebok for folkeskolen*, which was intended for the Norwegian primary and lower secondary school, Rolfsen secured a strong position as a nation builder, both through his drive to Norwegianize the Danish written language, and through the work of creating a common Norwegian identity; the latter was particularly important in the years around 1905 when Norway struggled to gain independence from Sweden.

Ole Edvart Rølvaag, on the other hand, was a prominent figure in the Norwegian-American community as a professor in Norwegian at St. Olaf College, as an advocate for conserving the Norwegian language and culture in America, and as an author, today best known for his trilogy *Giants in the Earth*. Between 1919 and 1925 he published the reader *Norsk læsebok* in three volumes, which was the last Norwegian-American reader ever published (Hvenekilde 1992; 1995).

In this presentation we will have two different aiming points. In a nation building context, language plays an important role (Herder 1772; Haugen 1966), and both these readers are published in an era of several reforms of the spelling in Norway. Thus, we will look at the choices regarding spelling made by Rolfsen and Rølvaag, did they follow the reforms implemented in Norway in 1907 and/or 1919, or did they follow a more conservative norm, in line with the mainstream Norwegian-American community?

Furthermore, we will look at to what extent they tried to build and convey a common Norwegian or Norwegian-American identity among the readers through the selection of texts included in the two readers (Anderson 1996; Smith 1991; Hobsbawm 2006). Our preliminary claim is that Rolfsen has a global approach; through his choices he tries to build a Pan-Norwegian identity by stressing that we find Norway and Norwegians on both sides of the Atlantic and that they belong to the same people. Rølvaag's focus, on the other hand, is more local: he wants to create a Norwegian-American identity among the immigrants and do not to the same extent see the link across the Atlantic. The fact that they choose two such different approaches is not a surprise, given the two author's different background; Rolfsen as a nation builder in Norway and Rølvaag's long time struggle to maintain the culture and language among Norwegian-Americans. Our aim is not only that our research advances knowledge in the field of the Norwegian immigrant language in the Americas, but also may stimulate similar research in other immigrant languages as well.

#### Literature

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