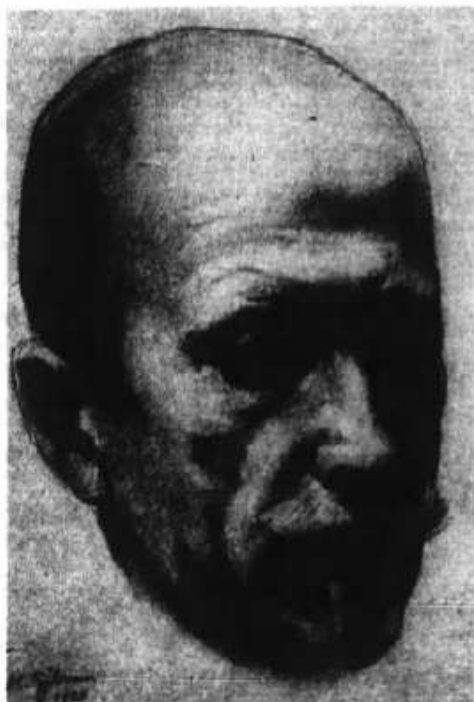


# Johan Bojer, Realist



Johan Bojer.

**JOHAN BOJER. The Man and His Works.** By Carl Gad. Moffat, Yard & Co.

**J**OHAN BOJER possesses what John Galsworthy terms "the stark realistic spiritual character of a race with special depths of darkness to contend with, and its own northern sunlight and beauty." In Llewellyn Jones's introduction to Carl Gad's "Johan Bojer, the Man and His Works," another attempt toward a suggestion of the general atmosphere of Bojer's works is made by quoting from "Traacherous Ground" the phrase about the incoming summer being like "inkling a mixture of sunshine and snow." Both of these descriptions fit the great Norwegian writer and both of them fail to adequately render him for the general reader. It takes no less than a book to give a fit estimate of Bojer, and this has been admirably performed by Gad's study, which takes up in chronological form the novels, fairy tales and plays that Bojer has done. A phalanx of critical appreciations are included with Gad's study, among them being reviews of "The Great Hunger," by John Galsworthy and Joseph Hergesholmer, of "The Face of the World," by James Branch Cabell, and of "Traacherous Ground," by Coeli Roberts. As has been intimated before, Llewellyn Jones has done an introduction for the study and Howard Willard Cook has written an appreciation of the frontispiece portrait of Bojer, which is by that talented Syrian artist Khalil Gilran. The study has been translated by Elizabeth Jolliffe Macintire. Such an array of talent could not help but produce at least an interesting book, but it remains a fact that Gad's study would have been quite adequate without any of the trimmings.

Johan Bojer is one of the two Scandinavian writers especially to the fore just now. With Knut Hamsun, he shares an extremely important place in the creative letters of the day. Hamsun, although he is the recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature, is far less known in this country, for but one book of his has had any circulation here. Further translations are promised, however. On the other hand, Bojer is in the remarkable position of having five novels translated and published here within the space of two years. His

popularity has been extensive, and it is therefore a matter of general interest to find out, if possible, who the man really is and just what he has accomplished in Norwegian letters.

Johan Bojer (the facts are taken from Carl Gad's book) was born March 6, 1872, at Orkadaloren, near Trondhjem, Norway. He was the son of a servant girl, and his mother, being unable to keep him, put him out to nurse. The greater part of his childhood was spent at Høsten at the cottage of Elias Faetten, with whose children he grew up. He played a usual part in the life of that district, fishing in the fjord, lending cattle in summer, and going twice a week to school, staying for periods of two days. At the conclusion of a short school course at Dybdahl's country school, Bojer took service with a farmer named Andreas Fallin. When he became 18 years of age he gained admission to a school for non-commissioned officers at Trondhjem, where he stayed for three years. After leaving the military school, where already the idea of becoming a poet had seized him, he took a commercial course, and passed several years thereafter in divers pursuits. He was a fisherman on the Lofot Islands, a commissioner and a sewing machine agent. In those years his first two books, "En Moder" (A Mother), 1894, and "Helge," 1896, were published. He was now definitely launched as an author, and with his first royalties he made a trip to Paris. From that city he tramped back home through Holland, a penniless writer. Thereafter he passed through years of half success, failures, and a deal of wandering through France, Italy, Denmark, Germany and England. He now lives at Hvalstad, a successful and contented writer with a family.

This brief outline of Bojer's life is enlarged but little in Gad's book, for the volume is primarily a critical and expository study of the man's work. He takes Bojer through the social criticism of his first books and a certain pessimistic tinge to the development of the ideas of optimism. The psychological way in which Bojer develops his characters is dwelt upon and the large place played by ideas for their own sake in the man's work. Bojer, he points

out, is first of all a man of ideas. He is a thinker, debating long, painfully and broodingly over life and its multitudinous problems. He strives to pierce its secrets, penetrates his way to the source of its laws and values. Gad also points out that many of the characters in Bojer's books are there first of all as illustrations and examples of generic ideas. The figures stand for more than mere human characters; they represent differing urges in life, certain movements and theories. Thus they become symbols standing for much more than they appear to be on a superficial reading. There is a tremendous danger in this style of writing, for quite often an author is prone to enlarge so on his characters as to make them out of proportion to their consistent development. They become puppets that dance as the strings are pulled, trumpets that blow forth the music that is in the author's mind.

Bojer is particularly successful in retaining the atmosphere of reality in his books. Although these characters of his, these men and women that live through the pages of "Life," "The Great Hunger," "Traacherous Ground," "The Face of the World" and the other books, are symbols of life-forces, of certain gestures of Time and Fate, they hardly ever fail of being authentic human beings at the same time. Gad points out, wisely enough, that the very fact that these figures stand as symbols in Bojer's mind removes them from the mere clever surface realism of the day. They are real and yet they stand for more than reality. There is a deep timbre in such thinking as this. It is the sort of work that is seen hardly ever in America or even England, but which is most highly developed in European countries.

The reality of Bojer's books is sustained throughout and this in spite of their comparative shortness. When one considers the hundreds of pages that it took Emile Zola, for instance, to present an idea in a realistic manner (and Zola, too, was a man who made his characters into symbols), one may well wonder at the dexterity with which Bojer encompasses his subject within three hundred pages. Many of his stories would be considered novelettes if written on this side of the Atlantic Ocean. However, none of them could be written on this side.

Mention has been made of a growth of optimism in Bojer's work. But Gad's study makes plain enough that this is never an obvious morality. At times the Norwegian is as bleak as his cold winds. He is also as invigorating. Life is a serious business with him, as it is with most Europeans, and it is not to be distorted or sugar-coated or twisted into futile moralizings. He thinks about life and shapes the materials that exist. False situations are practically unknown to him, although now and then his fondness for ideas carries him a bit too far. The fate of Astrid in "Life" is a case in point.

For those who love the books of Bojer this study will prove most illuminating. The translation appears to be poorly done in parts and Allan Porterfield, that excellent student of Scandinavian and German letters, has pointed out an amusing mistake to the reviewer. Elizabeth Jolliffe Macintire, the translator, has rendered one sentence, "He also gave lectures at Hoffding and Vald Vødd, and spent much of his time in the Imperial Library." When it is explained that Hoffding and Vald Vødd are the names of professors and lecturers and not places, the carelessness of the translation will be apparent. On the whole, though, the book does present Bojer in an extremely fine manner. It brings into our notice works of the Norwegian that have not yet been translated and undoubtedly arouses an appetite for them.

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