

Two Homelands: A Historian Considers His Life and Work

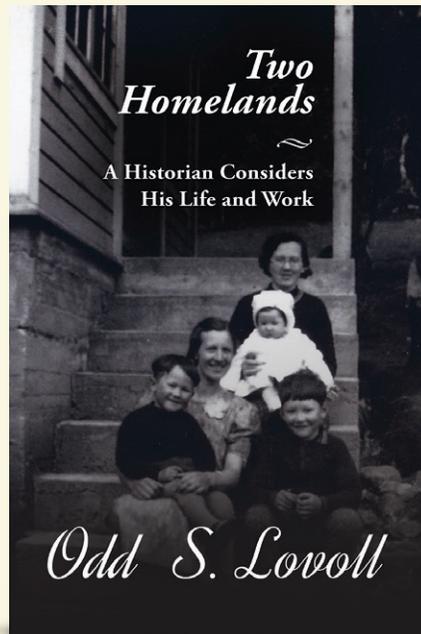
Odd S. Lovoll

(St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2018, 248 p., Paper, \$24.95.)

Odd Lovoll's memoir is a fascinating narrative of how his own life story directly informed his long and lauded career as a scholar of Norwegian immigration history. This summary of his work not only details the history of Norwegian immigration to America but also captivates readers with reflections on personal story and identity.

The new social history movement that arose in 1960s scholarship set itself against the prevailing consensus that immigrants to America left their cultures behind and assimilated into the melting pot of American culture and identity. Lovoll notes one founder of this new movement was historian Rudolph Vecoli, who directed the University of Minnesota's Immigration History Research Center from 1967 to 2005. Vecoli asserted that immigrants "clung tenaciously to their traditions and developed strategies to retain their heritage and resist pressures to embrace the American social and economic system." In 1969, decades before the historiography of Norwegian emigration to America had been developed, Vecoli was introduced to a young doctoral candidate at the University of Minnesota who had been born and raised in rural Norway.

But Odd Lovoll's personal story and identity were not that simple: he had spent his adolescence in Seattle's Ballard neighborhood, a Norwegian immigrant enclave, before his family's repatriation to Norway. After earning his degrees at Oslo Teachers' College and the University of Bergen, Lovoll taught English, Norwegian, and history in rural Norway. Several years later, he returned to the United States with his wife, Else, and their children to teach Norwegian at the University of North Dakota, where he simultaneously completed his master's



degree on the history of North Dakota's Norwegian-language publications. Thereafter, he moved with his family to the University of Minnesota for doctoral study under Vecoli, where Lovoll did his pioneering dissertation on the Norwegian American *Bygdelag*—rural immigrant societies based on their provinces of origin back in the home country. Thirty years later, at Lovoll's retirement from active teaching, Vecoli asserted that Lovoll's widely acclaimed body of work brought the specialization of Norwegian immigration history into the mainstream of American historiography, establishing him as the premier historian of Norwegian Americans.

Lovoll's own family history of immigration from Norway, and, more unusually, their repatriation back to Norway, had uniquely prepared him for his vocation on immigration scholarship. The long-overlooked phenomenon of immigrant repatriation is a strong theme in the book because of this personal experience. While teaching in Norway's rural middle and high schools, Lovoll read the scholar Ingrid Semmingsen's classic two-volume work on Norwegian immigration to America.

In those exhaustive volumes Lovoll recognized his own immigrant experience. Since returning to Norway at the age of 17, he had been treated as an outsider, introduced to people as "the American." His middle school students expressed appreciation at having an American teaching them English. Lovoll's dual development and identity meant that he truly did have two languages, two cultures, and two homelands in his formative years, even though he and Else did not receive US citizenship until he was 39 years old.

Two Homelands is so engaging that it is difficult to put the book down. By interspersing the history of Norwegian immigration to America (including Norway's diaspora during World War II) into his own personal story, Lovoll provides the context for his decades of total dedication to his scholarship, to all things Norwegian, and to his more than 30 years of teaching at St. Olaf College (where he received a prestigious award from Norway's King Olav V in 1986). After Lovoll retired in late 2000, he taught at the University of Oslo and served for 20 years as publications editor at the Norwegian-American Historical Association. Throughout all of these pursuits, Lovoll carried out his research and teaching across North America and Norway, building innumerable contacts and ongoing relationships with people and communities, working with a constant array of admiring students and colleagues everywhere he went. By his side through all of this was his closest, most important research colleague, the love of his life, Else Lovoll.

Two Homelands is the crowning glory of Lovoll's life and career, essential reading for anyone wishing to learn about Norwegian heritage and Norwegian emigration to America. In addition to intellectually engaging with those themes, it is a rich, substantive narrative on the complex subject of personal human identity.

—John Voelker



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