

## FREDRIKA BREMER: TRAVELER AND PROPHET

THE RECENT VISITS to Minnesota of various members of the Scandinavian royal houses remind one that the Old World has long been interested in the colonies and settlements across the Atlantic and that a whole procession of travelers has come to view the success of the emigrants. One of the most distinguished of these visitors early predicted a magnificent future for the Scandinavians of the Mississippi Valley, that "future home of more than two hundred and seventy-five millions of people." Indeed, she exclaimed, "What a glorious new Scandinavia might not Minnesota become! Here would the Swede find again his clear, romantic lakes, the plains of Scania rich in corn, and the valleys of Norrland; here would the Norwegian find his rapid rivers. . . . The Danes might here pasture their flocks and herds, and lay out their farms on richer and less misty coasts than those of Denmark." The very mythology of the homeland she transplanted to the great river, where the joys of Valhalla would not be wanting "in the New Vineland of the vine-crowned islands of the Mississippi, and the great divine hog Schrimmer has nowhere such multitudes of descendants as in the New World." Many parts of America evoked enthusiastic responses from this Swedish lady, but nowhere else did she envisage such prosperity for the Scandinavian emigrants; to her none of the American states had "a greater or a more beautiful future before them than Minnesota."<sup>1</sup>

Three years before she actually arrived in the United States Fredrika Bremer wrote to an anonymous American thanking him for a book which she had recently received

<sup>1</sup> Fredrika Bremer, *The Homes of the New World; Impressions of America*, 2: 56, 57, 120 (New York, 1853).

and acknowledging his friendly invitation to visit the New World.<sup>2</sup> The letter, hitherto unpublished, is worth quoting in part.

To your gift you have also joynd a most friendly invitation. I sincerely hope to be so happy once to say you personally my thanks for it. It has long been a wish of my heart to visit America and to see with my own eyes that new, rising world. Indeed there is no foreign land in the world that I wish to know out of North America and that especially for the peculiar turn of mind of its people and its management of life in public as in private life, in the state, the home, in society and in Nature.

Here are revealed both Miss Bremer's fumbling command of English idiom and her early desire to cross the Atlantic. Obviously she had long turned her thoughts westward.

Early in October, 1849, Fredrika Bremer landed in New York City, but she did not immediately travel toward the Scandinavian settlements. The fame of a new country and the welcome of its citizens claimed her attention, and before she finally boarded a lake steamer for Chicago she had spent the good part of a year along the Atlantic seaboard and in the South. Even then it was difficult to evade the hospitality of such intimate friends as Andrew Downing and James Russell Lowell and his brilliant young wife Maria.<sup>3</sup> The Lowells accompanied her westward to Niagara Falls; from there she proceeded alone.

Miss Bremer reached Chicago early in September, 1850, and found a miserable and ugly city which in her estimation resembled a huckstress rather than a queen. But the prairies, which she saw at the very periphery of the city, were

<sup>2</sup> Letter written from Årsta, October 23, 1846, in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society. It probably was written to Andrew J. Downing.

<sup>3</sup> Downing, now recognized as the father of American landscaping, was Miss Bremer's first host in the United States. "Fredrika Bremer stayed three weeks with us," Lowell wrote to a friend, "and I do not *like* her, I *love* her. She is one of the most beautiful persons I have ever known — so clear, so simple, so right-minded and -hearted, and so full of judgment." C. E. Norton, ed., *Letters of James Russell Lowell*, 1:174 (New York, 1894).

quite something else. Rapturously she described the great sea of grass with its birds and flowers and undulating horizon. The occasional log cabin marking a settler's pre-emption was a bird's nest floating on a sea. Sunflowers reached skyward four yards and more. To the astonished visitor the prairie was a sight less common and more magnificent than Niagara itself.<sup>4</sup>

After a brief pause in Milwaukee, where she was lionized in the fashion which she had come to anticipate in American cities, she spent a day at Pine Lake, Wisconsin, which, although one of the first Swedish settlements in the West, had even then shrunk to a mere half dozen families. Nevertheless, she was given a royal welcome, and the thrill of hearing her own tongue spoken freely and of once more seeing familiar customs was ample compensation for all the rigors of travel. When she and the blacksmith danced the "Nigar Polka" together, electrifying the small gathering, her cup of joy was complete.<sup>5</sup> It is not hard to picture in this setting the amiable lady whom Hawthorne deemed worthy to be the maiden aunt of the whole human race.

Before Miss Bremer could board a Mississippi steamboat for the journey to St. Paul a long arduous stage ride to Galena was necessary. On its completion she was thankful that she was still sound in body and limbs and felt positive that the worst feature of her western trip was over: "no one could possibly perform that uneasy journey through Wisconsin without having something to remember as long as he lived." After a short stopover at Galena occasioned by steamboat schedules, she boarded the "Nominee" on October 12, 1850. Among the passengers were Henry Hastings Sibley and Mrs. Sibley on a return journey from Washington, where he served in Congress as territorial delegate from Minnesota.

The voyage up the Mississippi in October gave as much

<sup>4</sup> *Homes of the New World*, 1:601-603.

<sup>5</sup> *Homes of the New World*, 1:617-626.

pleasure to Miss Bremer as it has given to countless other travelers. Particularly was she delighted with the purity of the water, for she had come to consider the river as a giant like the titans of old, strong but somewhat defiled. "Here its waters were clear, of a fresh, light-green color, and within their beautiful frame of distant violet-blue mountains, they lay like a heavenly mirror, bearing on their bosom verdant, vine-covered islands, like islands of the blest." As the boat crept northward she alternately praised the rocky hills which hemmed in the valley and the vegetation which covered their slopes, particularly the tangled network of vines everywhere fruitful. Indeed the steamboat trip was too short for her eager eyes; she wished that it might last eight days.<sup>6</sup>

The "Nominee" reached St. Paul late in the afternoon of October 17. To Miss Bremer the trip had been extremely pleasant; she not only thought six dollars an unusually low price for the comforts of her passage but she appreciated the courtesy of Captain Orrin Smith and the novelty of the scenery. She felt especially obligated to Sibley, "a clever, kind man, and extremely interesting to me from his knowledge of the people of this region, and their circumstances." He explained to her many of the peculiarities of the Sioux and often when passing an Indian village he would utter a wild cry, which invariably drew an exulting response from the shore. At the wharf the visitor was met by Governor and Mrs. Alexander Ramsey, who immediately extended to her their hospitality. Thus the Ramsey home became Miss Bremer's headquarters during her week's stay in Minnesota, and Ramsey himself acted as a kind of cicerone.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> *Homes of the New World*, 1:651; 2:3, 4, 16, 17, 21.

<sup>7</sup> *Homes of the New World*, 2:19, 22, 25; *Minnesota Pioneer* (St. Paul), October 17, 1850; Ramsey Diary, October 17, 1850. The Minnesota Historical Society has a copy of the Ramsey Diary.

She religiously saw all the places of interest. The day following her arrival she accompanied her host to the Falls of St. Anthony, but found them like the cascade of a great milldam. "River, falls, country, views, every thing here has more breadth than grandeur," she records. The visitors then called upon Mrs. John W. North, who lived on Nicollet Island, and to reach whose house it was necessary to cross a jam of pine logs lying in the water above the milldam. Miss Bremer was at first terrified by the prospect, but eventually made the crossing and was rewarded by finding a cultural oasis above the rapids, a home filled with music and books and pictures. Mrs. North entertained her guests with vocal and instrumental music, but when Fredrika Bremer was asked to sing she declined, saying, "I only sing for God in the church, and for little children." Ramsey wrote in his diary that evening that Miss Bremer had remarked gentleness of manner as a characteristic of the Americans, but observed also in them a great energy of purpose and will which made them less pleasing than the English.<sup>8</sup>

Other places to which the Swedish author was introduced included Fort Snelling, Fountain Cave, and the Little Falls — more familiar to a later generation as Minnehaha Falls — which she found elusively lovely and worthy of their own song. "The whitest of foam, the blackest of crags, the most graceful, and, at the same time, wild and gentle fall! Small things may become great through their perfection." Sunday morning, October 20, she and Mrs. Ramsey attended services in the Presbyterian church at St. Paul and heard the Reverend Edward D. Neill preach, and later in the day Miss Bremer accompanied the governor on a stroll along the bluffs back of St. Paul, appreciating the warmth of

<sup>8</sup> *Homes of the New World*, 2:27, 32; Ramsey Diary, October 18, 1850; Mrs. Rebecca Marshall Cathcart, "A Sheaf of Reminiscences," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 15:532.

Indian summer and the glorious colors of autumn. She apparently also visited the dalles of the St. Croix River, for an eyewitness recorded later that on looking into the great gorge of the stream she exclaimed, "One of God's beauteous spots of earth." Another interesting incident of her stay in Minnesota is her meeting with a Danish merchant, Dr. Charles W. W. Borup, who had made a small fortune out of furs and had married a woman with Indian blood.<sup>9</sup>

But whatever the original object of Fredrika Bremer's visit to the Northwest may have been, there is little doubt that her chief interest was the Indians. She observed the savages, their physique, bearing, dress, their dwellings and manner of life, their sports and ceremonies, the condition of their women. And through the intervention of Ramsey she got more than one Indian to pose for her so that she could carry away with her sketches to complement her verbal pictures.

This interest in the red man she manifested almost as soon as she commenced her river trip. On board the "Nominee" were several Indians, a Winnebago family of three and two young Sioux warriors. The latter especially caught her attention, as they reminded her of parading roosters. "They strut about now and then, and look proud, and then they squat themselves down on their hams, like apes, and chatter away as volubly as any two old gossips ever did." She observed also their hawk's bill noses and the hard, inhuman glance of the eyes, like that of a bird of prey scenting its quarry from afar. Three miles below

<sup>9</sup> Ramsey Diary, October 20, 1850; *Homes of the New World*, 2:54, 55, 58; William H. C. Folsom, "History of Lumbering in the St. Croix Valley," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 9:315. Folsom, incidentally, misdates Miss Bremer's visit by a year. Borup settled in St. Paul in 1848; he died, one of its wealthiest citizens, in 1859. John H. Stevens remembered Miss Bremer's enthusiasm for the picturesque scenery along the Mississippi and for the radiance of the autumn coloring. See his *Personal Recollections of Minnesota and Its People*, 90 (Minneapolis, 1890).

St. Paul she noticed the Sioux village of Kaposia, with its twenty wigwams and the log house of the missionary, Dr. Thomas S. Williamson. And the streets of the infant city, she declared, swarmed with Indians fantastically painted and ornamented with an utter lack of taste. "Here comes an Indian who has painted a great red spot in the middle of his nose; here another who has painted the whole of his forehead in small lines of yellow and black; there a third with coal-black rings round his eyes. All have eagles' or cocks' feathers in their hair, for the most part colored, or with scarlet tassels of worsted at the ends." In general, she thought, the women wore less paint and showed better taste than the men; also they seemed less rigid and more humane. But the women were obviously the beasts of burden for their husbands.

Fredrika Bremer was interested almost as much in sketching as she was in writing, and she took back with her to Sweden portraits of Longfellow, Emerson, and other celebrities whom she had induced to pose. She was extremely eager to draw some of the Indians from life, and with this purpose in mind she visited several tepees, "four very respectable Indian huts" close to Fort Snelling. Governor Ramsey and an interpreter accompanied her, and the group spent a full day at the St. Peter's Indian agency. Miss Bremer was rather surprised to find, not the dirt and poverty which she had anticipated, but a rude oriental splendor, blankets in profusion, showy cushions, pipes, and of course the implements of hunting. She sampled the thin soup which was simmering in a huge kettle, a flavorless broth without salt, and she ate a cake which the squaw had just baked and pronounced it excellent.<sup>10</sup>

Shortly after, she persuaded an old chief to become her

<sup>10</sup> *Homes of the New World*, 2:20, 24, 26, 34; Ramsey Diary, October 22, 1850.

model, although he grumbled at being painted without his ceremonial regalia; and when she had finished this sketch she drew a young Indian woman who appeared attired in her wedding finery. Feather Cloudwoman, the name of Miss Bremer's subject, was apparently of unusual beauty, and her remarkably light coloring, magnificent eyes, and modest carriage made a deep impression on the artist. But her general difficulty in getting models she attributed to the Indian belief that a likeness on paper subtracts from the life span of the person delineated.<sup>11</sup>

Miss Bremer's experiences with the Indians naturally led her to reflect on their condition, especially that of the women. An ardent feminist herself, she thought often of the subjection of the Indian squaw and the degradation of a life from which the only escape was suicide. Winona and Ampato Sapa, both of whom killed themselves rather than submit to domestic ignominy, exemplified most clearly to her the deeply tragic life of the savage women. The only advantage which she perceived in the Indian's existence was freedom from the artificial bonds and prohibitions of society, a liberty which her own experiences had taught her to value highly.

One of the last events of Miss Bremer's stay in Minnesota was a medicine dance in which about a hundred Indians participated, dancing to the unmelodious music of drums and gourds and shaking silver bells violently as they performed their saltations. Such an experience led her to reflect on the religious life of the red man, and for the edification of her invalid sister at Årsta she put together what she had seen and learned of Indian theology. Always a conscientious traveler, Miss Bremer made every attempt to learn the history and ideology of the people among whom she traveled, but one suspects that in regard to the Indians

<sup>11</sup> *Homes of the New World*, 2:38-40.



her attention was chiefly that of the artist, focused on the picturesque and the novel. At any rate when her stay had drawn to a close she confessed her unwillingness to depart. "I wish to see more of the Indians," she wrote home, "and their way of life, and feel something like a hungry person who is obliged to leave a meal which he had just commenced."<sup>12</sup>

Contemporary accounts of her visit reveal the pleasure which she gave as well as received during her residence as Governor Ramsey's guest. The *Minnesota Pioneer* of October 24 expressed its gratification that so distinguished a person as the Swedish author had come to Minnesota to see this "Stockholm of America."

Though far away from her native land, she is not a stranger to us, for she is one of those individuals whom all lands love to claim, and whose birth place is soon forgotten, because her presence is felt everywhere. Her manners are natural and her expressions candid. Unlike those literary women, whom Byron hated, and called "Blue Stockings," she makes no display, and loves not to talk about her own productions, but desires to place herself, in the attitude of a learner.

The *Pioneer* then proceeded to compare her literary work, invariably revealing a sound and pure mind, with the productions of Eugene Sue and that brazen amazon, George Sand; and closed its editorial account by expressing regret that Miss Bremer felt obliged to leave Minnesota for the dark pine forests and tranquil lakes of Sweden. Similarly, the *Minnesota Chronicle and Register* of October 21 declared its appreciation of the visitor.

We only regret that she should have delayed her visit until the frost has seriously marred the beauty of our landscapes. But we are assured that she, nor any other true lover of the beautiful, will ever regret a visit to Minnesota, at any season of the year, always excepting the last of March and first week of April.

When the "Nominee" departed for Galena on October 25, 1850, the paper praised her fulsomely. "Miss Bremer, by

<sup>12</sup> *Homes of the New World*, 2:36, 44, 58.

her kind cordiality and simplicity of manner, made many friends while here, and she has the best wishes of our community for health, happiness and prosperity."<sup>13</sup>

As the steamboat forged down the Mississippi Fredrika Bremer must often have thought of the land which she envisaged as a new home for her emigrant countrymen, and many allusions in her later writings bespeak the deep impression which Minnesota made upon her. Writing from near St. Louis to her friend Andrew Downing on November 11, 1850, she said:

Well, I have been among the Savages since last I wrote to you, have seen them by their fires, in their "Tipis," seen their graves and strange life, and when we meet I shall show you sketches of and speak more about them. I have also seen the scenery on the upper Mississippi, its high bluffs crowned with autumn-golden oaks, and rocks like ruined walls and towers, ruins from the times when the Megatherium and mastodons walked the earth, — and how I did enjoy it!

And she repeated her prophecy that the valley of the Mississippi would some day provide a livelihood for millions of people, asking questions of heaven and earth about futurity.<sup>14</sup>

Fredrika Bremer was neither the first nor the last of the Swedish visitors to the United States.<sup>15</sup> But in a rare degree she combined literary grace and skill with the power to observe and the energy to see. Extremely fortunate in her translator Mary Howitt, she saw her book on America published in London and New York almost as soon as it appeared in Sweden; and her already large audience in the

<sup>13</sup> *Minnesota Chronicle and Register* (St. Paul), October 28, 1850; Ramsey Diary, October 25, 1850. The *Chronicle and Register* for November 4 contains a long appreciation of Jenny Lind written by Miss Bremer; the *Pioneer* for October 24 reprints an obituary notice of President Taylor which Miss Bremer had written for the eastern papers.

<sup>14</sup> Adolph B. Benson, ed., "Fredrika Bremer's Unpublished Letters to the Downings," in *Scandinavian Studies*, 11:192 (May, 1931).

<sup>15</sup> See for example Roy W. Swanson, "Fredrika Bremer's Predecessors," in *Swedish-American Historical Bulletin*, 1:53-62 (March, 1928).

United States was multiplied by the general interest in her volumes of travel. Judged by the candid and forthright accounts of more recent travelers, Miss Bremer's *Homes of the New World*—her chief claim to immortality—may seem somewhat prolix and dull; but her observations will always retain a historical value and her prediction of a new Scandinavia in Minnesota will not soon be forgotten. An astute and careful traveler who was preoccupied with social and economic conditions, she chronicled whatever she saw, and interest in her work has not lagged despite the fact that it is almost a century ago that the America fever was raging high.

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