Verses on Norwegian emigration to America, 1853

Introduction

Between 1836 and 1865, approximately 55,000 Norwegians sailed to the United States.¹ Like most immigrants, they sought opportunities that didn’t exist at home—religious freedom, economic security, land ownership, and educational and social advancement. Most of the emigrants were members of the lowest class, landless farmers who were subject to oppressive social conventions and treated with scorn in their native country.

This anonymous poem,² “A Farewell Ode to Emigrants on Their Journey to America,” written in 1853 from the perspective of someone who stayed in Norway, illuminates the reasons some left Norway and praises the wonders of America—the natural resources and beauty of the land as well as the opportunities to prosper through hard work and possibly an advantageous marriage:

O that all that you here bitterly must manage without,
you in that distant safe harbor will get tenfold back.
In America’s valleys abounding with flowers,
where the earth does not mock the sweat of its grower.

Many who traveled to America sent letters back home describing their experiences to attract new settlers. The narrator picks up on that practice and makes the following suggestion to his compatriots overseas:

To those left behind here in Norway’s valleys
write many a true and loving word,
for them it will soothe the pain of yearning
and create desire to leave the North . . .

And in a thousand years after the North will be deserted
and the Norwegian’s offspring by the banks of Missouri
will behold freedom’s beautiful red sunrise
shining there in wealth, light and peace,
then forgotten will be the yearning and hardship and miserable days,
in the Norwegians’ new and happy home!

². The verses are written in Danish, as Denmark had ruled in Norway for 400 years and Danish was the primary written language. After Norway split from Denmark in 1814, Norwegians developed their own written language, which gradually replaced Danish as the preferred literary language.
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Excerpt

You are going away to maybe never no more
Norway see, your homeland behold.
O that all that you here bitterly must manage without,
you in that distant safe harbor will get tenfold back.
In America’s valleys abounding with flowers,
where the earth does not mock the sweat of its grower,
on your journey there we pray that God
will look down upon your wandering with blessings!
[...]

To those left behind here in Norway’s valleys
write many a true and loving word,
for them it will soothe the pain of yearning
and create desire to leave the North
where brave women, children and men only are provided
scorn and shame, destitution and poverty.
You have it better then, when you speak,
when you beckon them to come where you went.

Questions for Discussion

Read the introduction and the translation of the poem. Study the image of the printed poem, which is written in Danish, and read the explanation for the use of Danish in footnote 2. Then apply your knowledge of American history and immigration to answer the following questions:

1. To which economic class of Norwegians is this poem addressed?
2. Describe the conditions in Norway that led the poet to commend Norwegians who left their homeland.
3. According to the poet, in which ways will life be better for those who travel to America?
4. Why do you think the poet chose the form of an ode to express his opinion on the subject of Norwegian immigration to America?
Translation

A Farewell Ode to Emigrants on Their Journey to America.
Mel. Bertram’s Farewell Ode to France.³

1.
You are going away to maybe never no more
Norway see, your homeland behold.
O that all that you here bitterly must manage without,
you in that distant safe harbor will get tenfold back.
In America’s valleys abounding with flowers,
where the earth does not mock the sweat of its grower,
on your journey there we pray that God
will look down upon your wandering with blessings!

2.
The hand of the Father then loyally accompany you
on your journey across the ocean blue!
And lead you in your future days,
preventing fever, pestilence and bad luck from reaching you;
no snake bites, or vermin there approaching
where you build your peaceful abode,
No harm from the wild! – Our Father gently protect
you all! – Healthy, strong and happy be.

3.
And God who is the guardian of innocence,
his eyes will keep vigil over your small ones;
no storm, nor fire will destroy your huts,
and you will not suffer from livelihood’s bitter sorrows!
Yes, O that you will by Sabina’s beautiful beaches
get to watch the wonderful fruits of your toil and sweat!
“We Norwegians are,” that thought should uplift you,
when you find the day oppressive and hot.

4.
When longing for home weighs down on your soul,
then think: “our right home country is the place
where we actually get paid for all our hard labor,

³ The verses were intended to be sung to what was probably a well-known melody, “Bertram’s Farewell Ode to France,” possibly “Gen. Bertrand’s Afskedsquad til Frankrig.”
where hunger dare not approach us,
moreover there is more of God’s wonderful sky here
than out North, our home country of yore,
and the top soil is fertile, all nature’s abundance
is rich in its diversity, that cannot be denied.”

5.
When you in a better home country stand,
don’t forget your friends in the cold North,
that will never on your coast land;
but trudge heavily on Norway’s barren soil.
Send them a letter, a penny with a picture of freedom
so they with affection can stare at it,
on the ideal they can imagine,
in helmet and armor joyfully standing strong.

6.
To those left behind here in Norway’s valleys
write many a true and loving word,
for them it will soothe the pain of yearning
and create desire to leave the North
where brave women, children and men only are provided
scorn and shame, destitution and poverty.
You have it better then, when you speak,
when you beckon them to come where you went.

7.
In never ending struggle like brothers together you should
as worthy is for men from the old North
fight manly under song and joy
to provide your family with bread and fertile soil.
Thankful to God you spend your days
on what is honorable and right; –
there is progress – it only regresses
when your actions are lowly and bad.

8.
My friend, I wish you a Yankee daughter
as wife, – beautiful and rich she must be,
and virtuous, – one who there will be a good replacement
for the women that you here could not get,
that there in quiet clean and domestic joy
you truly can enjoy the best dream of your youth
what fate here would not provide you
is wonderfully given to you at Sabina’s stream!

9.
And in a thousand years after the North will be deserted
and the Norwegian’s offspring by the banks of Missouri
will behold freedom’s beautiful red sunrise
shining there in wealth, light and peace,
then forgotten will be the yearning and hardship and miserable days,
in the Norwegians’ new and happy home! –
Farewell, farewell! and the Lord be with you
on your way wherever you head forth.

10.
Thanks for your good company here! Do know from me
my wishes and warm prayers to God
hopefully not in vain I am raising
for your wellbeing: O for the young strong sprouts
of Norwegian stock in America to progress
to the delight and luck of father and mother
and all good! Salvation you will enjoy
when you one day leave this earth!

11.
As belief is best shown in the man’s deed,
that the one who always acts right and well,
is dearest to God, therefore also should be praised
that freedom of spirit, that for happiness and luck
to all, in America must prevail;
there a man is not asked about his belief,
to each one fairly life’s mystery is solved
he enjoys the waning moments of his life into death with calm.

Hamar 1853.
Printed at Thorv. A. Hansen’s printing house.
“Et Afskedsvqad til Emigranter paa Reisen til Amerika [A Farewell Ode to Emigrants on Their Journey to America],”
Hamar, Norway, 1853, p. 1. (Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC09535)
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“Et Afskedsquad til Emigranter paa Reisen til Amerika [A Farewell Ode to Emigrants on Their Journey to America],”
Hamar, Norway, 1853, p. 2. (Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC09535)
“Et Afskedsquad til Emigranter paa Reisen til Amerika [A Farewell Ode to Emigrants on Their Journey to America],”
Hamar, Norway, 1853, p. 3. (Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC09535)
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“Et Afskedsquad til Emigranter paa Reisen til Amerika [A Farewell Ode to Emigrants on Their Journey to America],” Hamar, Norway, 1853, p. 4. (Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC09535)