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Äppelvik between the old and new worlds

Basel-born Felix Moeschlin highlighted the dangers of overhasty modernisation in his novel “Amerika-Johann” using the example of a Swedish village.

CHARLES LINSMAYER

“I’m surrounded by nature day and night. I arrived here two weeks ago but it feels as though I’ve been living in this forest for years. Haven’t I always been here?” Felix Moeschlin, who wrote this in the NZZ in 1908, fell in love with Sweden. He lived there from 1908 to 1914 and met the painter Elsa Hamar, who would become the mother of his three children. This is also where the author from Basel, born in 1882, chose to set his third novel entitled “Der Amerika-Johann”, which followed his rustic novel “Die Königsmieds”, set in his local Leimental valley, and the artistic novel “Hermann Hitz”.

An astute homecomer

The setting is the rural village of Äppelvik, behind which lies Leksand on Lake Siljan, where Moeschlin built his own house single-handedly. This is where his character “Amerika-Johann” returns home to after many years to open up the modern world to villagers through a sawmill, shop and new financing strategies. All goes well until the hastily launched business venture collapses and the farmers sell their farms to the charlatan for a pittance for a project which is something akin to a Swedish version of Ballenberg, where ancient traditions are reduced to profit-making folklore for affluent tourists from all over the world. Only when it emerges that the new owner plans to sell the farms he has amassed to a dubious millionaire do the farmers stir from their lethargy, unceremoniously beat the strange prophet to death and face the consequences of the murder – the adults end up in prison while the young have to rebuild this corrupted community based on proven methods but also by embracing moderate change.

Retaining the farming community

Had Moeschlin not possessed such clear insight into Sweden and its culture, Äppelvik could have been replaced with Zermatt or Grindelwald. The author of the novel “Amerika-Johann”, which was well received in Switzerland in 1912, was a top appointment when he became director of the resort of Arosa in 1915. And not just there but also in his later roles as a columnist on the “Basler Nationalzeitung”, as the

editor of the “Zürcher Tat” and as the National Councillor for Landesring, maintaining a vibrant farming community was just as important to him as keeping up with new developments.

In 1934, he sought to combat unemployment in Switzerland by setting up a farming cooperative in Brazil, and in 1949 illustrated in the two-volume book entitled “Wir durchbohren den Gotthard” (Tunnelling through the Gotthard) how the high-risk project of the first Gotthard Tunnel, which claimed many lives, ultimately proved a blessing for the nation. The fact that Moeschlin – who was President of the Swiss Literature Society from 1924 to 1942 and died in Basel in 1969 – played a significant role in many of his fellow authors, who had fled from Hitler, being prohibited to work or deported during the Second World War is one of the darker chapters in this author’s life.

However, in “Amerika-Johann”, his most successful novel, he managed to combine the struggle between old and new worlds, which also had far-reaching ramifications for Switzerland, with an inspirational homage to Sweden.

Bibliography: “Der Amerika-Johann” was last published in 1981 with an epilogue by Egon Wilhelm in the Ex Libris series “Frühling der Gegenwart” and is available second-hand.



“What farmers owned in the past was inherited and not chosen or desired. They were farmers because their fathers had been farmers. That is why their very existence was so easily shaken. We choose our lives, and they are not governed by duty and custom but rather by curiosity, enjoyment and enthusiasm.”

From: Felix Moeschlin: “Der Amerika-Johann”. A novel. Ex Libris-Verlag 1981. (out of print)

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