



MALMÖ HÖGSKOLA

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It is popular in these times of globalization, indeed, probably even considered important, to uphold and safeguard national identity and cultural heritage in various ways. We've seen it in Denmark, where a xenophobic party has had great influence on public policy which, among other things, has led to the construction of various national canons, even in sports; we see it in Sweden in the form of the Swedish Democrats Party, which celebrates the Swedish cultural heritage and whose members are happy to wear traditional folk costumes whenever there's an opportunity; it's played out in Finland with the success of the True Finns' Party and its demands for an end to immigration to protect various national values. But do we see it in Norway? Yes, Norway has its Progressiv Party with xenophobic ideas, which they in many respects share with the mass murderer Breivik. The Norwegian cultural heritage is upheld by, among others, **Norsk Kulturarv** (the Norwegian Heritage Foundation), and the publisher Font (which of course has nothing in common with right-wing nationalist politics), whose English-language series **Norwegian Heritage** in a number of volumes treats ur-Norwegian phenomena like mountains and fjords, Ibsen and Nansen, folk tales and - skiing. Erkki Vettenniemi has read Thor Gotaas' small and beautifully bound volume *Norway - The Cradle of Skiing*, and he appreciates what he has read; however, from this celebrated cultural historian he had expected a clearer indication that Norwegian skiing is not one but two cultures, which can be exemplified by Fridtjof Nansen and Bjørn Dæhlie, respectively.

Ways of Skiing, Modes of Writing

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*Thor Gotaas***Norway – the Cradle of Skiing**

Translated by J. Basil Cowlshaw

119 pages, hc., ill.

Nesøya: Font Forlag 2011 (Norwegian Heritage)

ISBN 978-82-8169-092-9

At the outset, I should probably make it clear that *Norway – The Cradle of Skiing* is not a scholarly book. Granted, Thor Gotaas is an acclaimed cultural historian of skiing and running, but this English-language hardback is aimed at a general audience. It is meant to be an easily digested introduction to the phenomenon known as “Norwegian skiing.” Indeed, it belongs to a “Norwegian heritage” book series that embraces the Nordic country’s “most important and best-known national icons,” “natural wonders” and “cultural expressions.” (I’m quoting the back cover.)

Accordingly, I will assess the skiing tome from a specific standpoint. Can scholars write for laypeople without betraying the often complicated and nonlinear nature of history? Should scholars refuse to dilute their message, or should they simply opt for a smooth narrative?

In the two-page preface to his refreshingly compact book, Gotaas describes “a perfect [Sunday] for skiing” in the outskirts of Oslo. To many Norwegians, skiing



represents “a sacred rite,” and nature, for its part, stands for “a cathedral without walls.” Having entered this kind of cathedral on skis, Gotaas opines, “they come face to face with the glory of Creation without recourse to books or sermons.”

Now, it may well be that some Norwegians relate to skiing in such a sublime way, but what has that got to do with the conspicuously muscular character gliding in a tight-fitting Lycra outfit on the front cover of the book? (He appears to be the multiple olympic and world champion Bjørn Dæhlie.) Clearly, we are dealing here with two distinct skiing cultures; on the one hand, recreational skiing, and on the other hand, competitive skiing. Can they legitimately be considered as belonging to a single master narrative? No war historian, I reckon, would dare to discuss nuclear warfare alongside snowball fights. (The analogy is strictly illustrative.)

That said, I do acknowledge the crucial fact that Gotaas was commissioned by the “Norwegian heritage” people to pen a 100-page tome in celebration of Norwegian skiing yesterday, today and tomorrow. How could he (or any other writer in his position) have deconstructed the heritage concept without ditching the entire project?

The great explorer Fridtjof Nansen has earned three pages and an action picture in the book. He was in the habit of calling skiing “the sport of sports,” Gotaas observes. “He had no time for competitive sports, involving as they did a stressful race against the clock.” What gets lost in translation is Nansen’s skilful choice of words. Just like many other Scandinavians, he insisted on distinguishing traditional, homespun *idrett* from modern, imported sports. Although Nansen’s criticism of modern sport reverberated well beyond Norway, Gotaas never elaborates the curious remark on the race against time. Then again, if he had, the cracks on the construct conveniently known as “Norwegian skiing” might have been exposed to the extent that, sooner rather than later, the whole edifice would have come crashing down.

Otherwise I happily sing the praises of the chapters on the evolution of skis and accompanying body techniques. Gotaas also touches on ski jumping and, to a lesser extent, slalom, the sportification of which took place elsewhere (despite the Norwegian origin of the word). Truly, he constantly enlightens his non-specialist readers on a number of aspects associated with the art of skiing, which is more than can be said about some historians writing for a general audience.

On the very last page, a brief discussion of today’s elite skiers is followed by a paean to skiing “of a gentler nature.” Most Norwegians abstain from racing “through the woods like madmen,” Gotaas concludes. (The gendered form of lunatics can perhaps be attributed to his translator.) “Now, as in the past, what counts is to get out into winter’s wonderland.”

Again, “as in the past” (see my remarks on the preface), a textual trip down the chasm between the two skiing cultures is shunned. Cutting-edge competitive skiing shares the pristine trails with playful and potentially spiritual skiing. As a pocket-sized coffee table book, then, *Norway – The Cradle of Skiing* is an admirable achievement – rich in informative anecdotes, thorough and incisive. On top of that, the author has inadvertently bequeathed a research agenda to the next historian of skiing, an agenda that surely culminates with a demand to tear the two skiing cultures decisively apart from each other.

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