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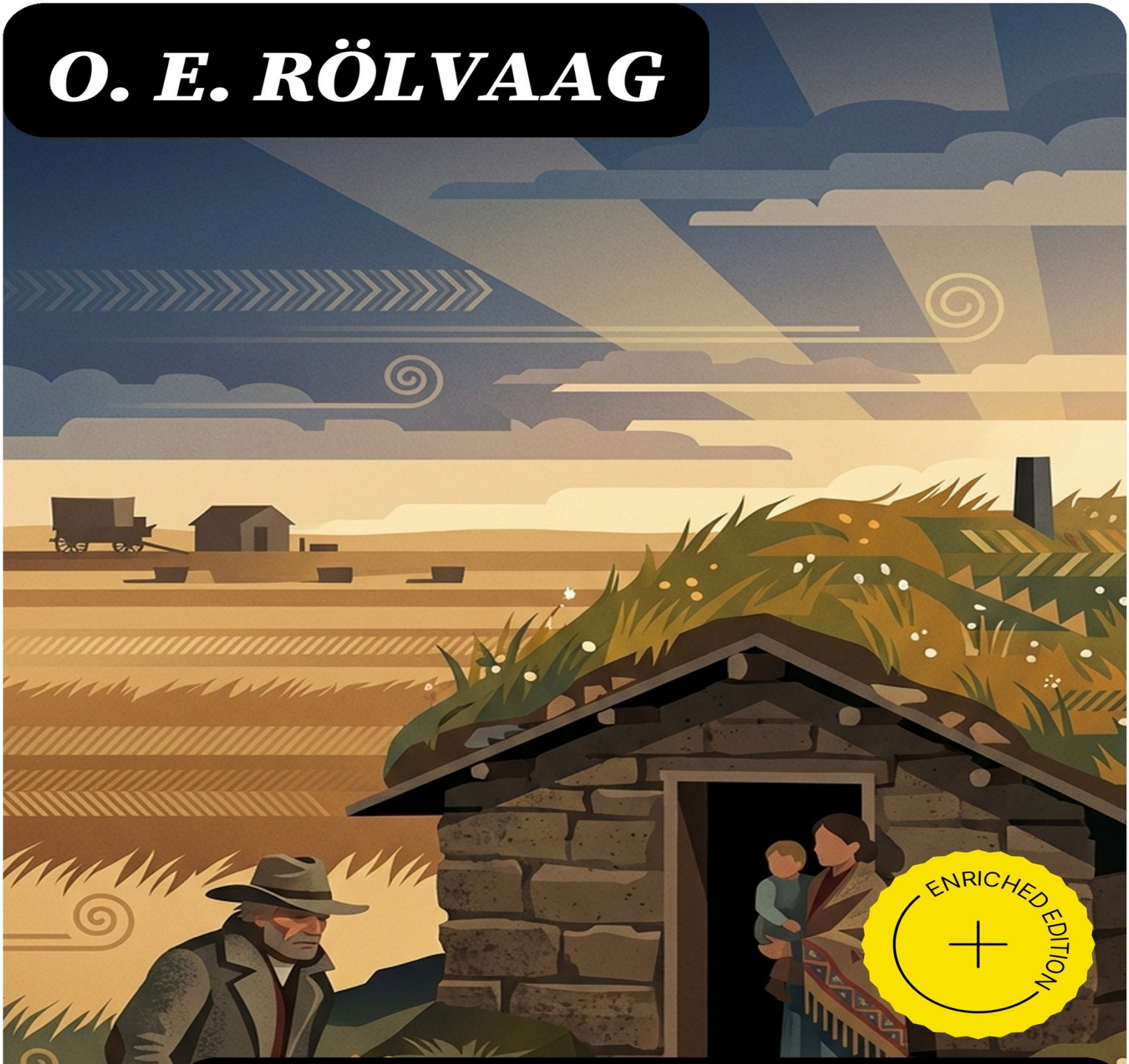
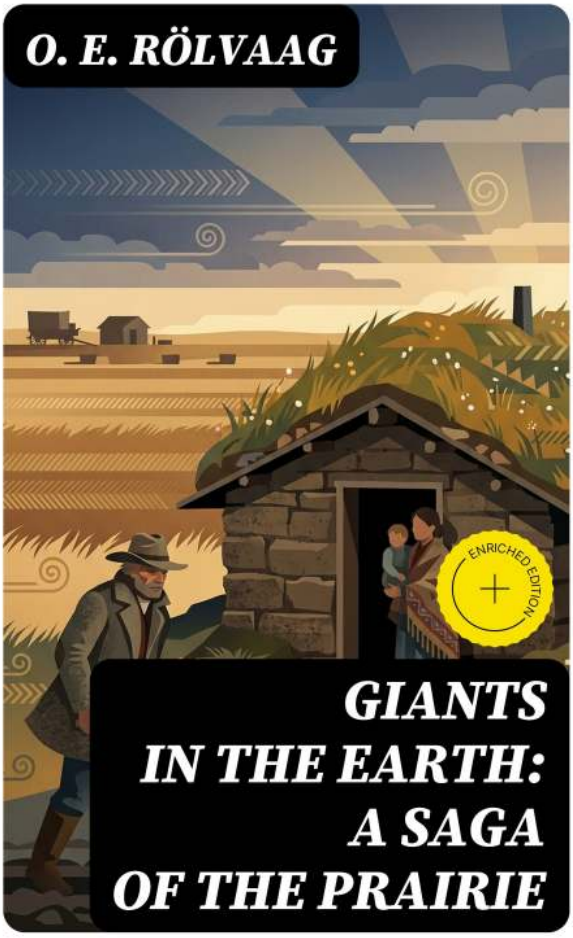


GIANTS IN THE EARTH: A SAGA OF THE PRAIRIE


O. E. RÖLVAAG
ENRICHED EDITION
GIANTS IN THE EARTH: A SAGA OF THE PRAIRIE

O. E. Rölvaag

Giants in the Earth: A Saga of the Prairie

Enriched edition.

Introduction, Studies and Commentaries by Bret Alden

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Introduction

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This novel captures how vast hope and unyielding hardship confront one another on an open horizon, pressing immigrants to decide what they can carry forward from the old world, what they must surrender to claim a new life, and what the land itself will demand in return as seasons turn, neighbors gather and disperse, language is tested by silence and wind, and ordinary acts of building, plowing, praying, and waiting expand into an epic where courage merges with fear, ambition with doubt, and the measure of success is taken not only in acres and harvests but in the hidden weather of the human spirit.

O. E. Rölvaag’s Giants in the Earth: A Saga of the Prairie is a landmark of American immigrant fiction, a work of realist, historical narrative set on the northern Great Plains in the Dakota Territory during the late nineteenth century. First appearing in the 1920s, with its English-language publication in 1927, the novel draws on the author’s intimate knowledge of Norwegian settler life. Its landscape is not mere backdrop but a shaping force, and its saga form anchors individual lives within the wider motion of migration, land-claiming, and community-building that marked a formative era in United States history.

The premise is spare and elemental: a small group of Norwegian settlers, led by an enterprising farmer and his cautious wife, stakes out homesteads on the prairie and begins the work of turning open grassland into a place to

live. The narrative follows seasons of labor and waiting, weather and soil, the slow arrival of neighbors, and the precarious rhythms of survival. Without disclosing later turns, it is safe to say that the novel’s drama lies less in sudden events than in day-to-day choices, subtle shifts in trust and resolve, and the pressure of distance from everything once familiar.

Reading Rölvaag is an immersion in patient, plainspoken prose that gathers a quiet, cumulative power. The voice is largely third-person and observant, moving between panoramic descriptions of sky, grass, and storms and closely held views of thought and feeling. The style is measured and exact, attentive to tools, tasks, and small rituals, yet capable of sudden, luminous intensity when the horizon darkens or opens. The tone balances austerity with dignity, allowing understated humor in neighborly exchange and the comfort of shared labor, while sustaining an undercurrent of tension that is never far from the edge of daily life.

Key themes emerge steadily: the search for belonging in a new land; the pull between communal obligation and individual desire; the friction between aspiration and the limits set by climate, distance, and time. The book probes how memory shapes identity, how faith and doubt accompany risk, and how language—kept, altered, or lost—mediates a sense of self. It also attends to differing burdens within a household, acknowledging that the same prairie that emboldens one person can unmoor another. Nature here is not neutral; it is an active presence that tests resolve and reshapes expectation.

For contemporary readers, Giants in the Earth retains urgency because it confronts questions that still animate public and private life: what it means to leave home and make another, how communities negotiate difference, and how stories of opportunity coexist with costs that are not easily tallied. Its portrait of labor, weather, and waiting resonates in an age attentive to climate and the fragility of rural life. The novel also invites reflection on national narratives of expansion, asking readers to consider how ideals are forged, revised, and sometimes strained when survival and aspiration meet on contested ground.

Approach this book with the patience it honors: its momentum builds through exact detail, quiet accumulation, and the dignity of ordinary endeavor. Attend to the landscape as a character, to silence as a form of dialogue, and to how small decisions are amplified by distance and time. The result is a reading experience at once intimate and epic, illuminating the textures of settlement without glamorizing its trials. In its clarity of vision and moral steadiness, Giants in the Earth endures as a vital account of beginnings, a meditation on what people hope to found, and a measure of what they must endure to found it.

Synopsis

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Giants in the Earth: A Saga of the Prairie, by O. E. Rölvaag, follows a small band of Norwegian immigrants pushing westward into the open grasslands of the northern plains. At its center are the energetic settler Per Hansa and his more apprehensive wife, Beret, who travel with their children in search of land and a future. The novel opens with the caravan adrift on a vast horizon, evoking both possibility and peril. Rölvaag establishes the prairie as a formidable presence while tracing the settlers' first choices about where to stop, how to claim ground, and what it means to begin again.

Upon selecting a site, the group throws itself into the practical work of survival. Dugouts and sod houses take shape, seed is saved, and trails to the nearest trading point are mapped. Per Hansa's ingenuity and optimism propel the community, encouraging neighbors to share tools and labor. Yet the same openness that fuels growth exposes vulnerabilities: isolation, unfamiliar climate, and the uncertainty of distant laws. Beret's memories of home sharpen the ache of displacement. As the seasons turn, Rölvaag follows routines of plowing, hunting, and hauling water, showing how each task knits a settlement while revealing the costs of life at the margins.

Early successes—fences raised, fields broken, and modest yields—nurture hope and a sense of ownership. New arrivals swell the community, bringing news, accents, and

expectations that must be blended into a workable order. Questions of land boundaries, fairness, and authority surface, testing the settlers' cohesion. Per Hansa's leadership style, confident and improvisational, wins admirers while creating friction with those who prize caution and strict adherence to rules. Rölvaag lets small incidents around trade, lending, and claim markers gather weight, suggesting how prosperity can unsettle as much as scarcity. The prairie's openness, once a promise, becomes a field of contested decisions.

Religion and tradition emerge as both refuge and fault line. Gatherings for worship, reading, and song provide solace and a shared moral vocabulary, but they also sharpen disagreements about authority in the household and the community. Beret's conscience, formed by Old World piety and fear of transgression, grows more insistent as she confronts isolation and the dizzying sense of boundlessness. Per Hansa, focused on tangible results, tends to interpret risk as opportunity rather than temptation. Their marriage becomes a microcosm of competing pioneer impulses: the drive to master a new world and the instinct to hedge ambition with humility and restraint.

The environment asserts itself with cycles of abundance and ruin. Storms flatten improvements, and unseasonable cold or heat can undo months of labor. Rölvaag records insect infestations, erratic weather, and shortages with matter-of-fact detail, emphasizing how thin the safety margin remains. Travel to distant stores for flour or tools is risky, yet necessary. Encounters with Native inhabitants

occur at the edges of this struggle, reflecting wary coexistence shaped by the era’s prejudices and practical needs. The settlers learn that skill and will cannot fully shield them; the land’s rhythms must be understood, endured, and sometimes simply survived.

As pressures mount, the novel turns inward to the psychology of exile and hope. Beret’s distress deepens into an illness of spirit that the community does not fully comprehend, and the responsibilities of parenting and household management grow heavier in the face of scarcity. Per Hansa, increasingly prominent among the settlers, is pulled between communal obligation and the quiet emergencies of his own home. Rölvaag builds toward a severe winter test in which travel, rescue, and waiting become moral as well as practical trials. The narrative emphasizes endurance and the ambiguous costs of courage without resolving every conflict.

By the close, Giants in the Earth stands as a study of how communities are made and unmade by landscape, belief, and the pressures of belonging. Without romanticizing hardship, the novel questions what is gained and lost when people uproot themselves and measure worth by acres and yield. It complicates frontier mythology by pairing ingenuity with vulnerability and ambition with conscience. Rölvaag’s portrayal of language, memory, and faith resonates beyond its historical setting, offering a clear-eyed account of immigrant aspiration and its psychological price. The book’s endurance lies in its balanced gaze: hopeful yet unsparing, intimate yet spacious.

Historical Context

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Set chiefly in the 1870s and 1880s on the northern Great Plains, Giants in the Earth dramatizes the immigrant homesteading era in what was then Dakota Territory. O. E. Rölvaag, a Norwegian-born writer who settled in South Dakota in 1896 and later taught at St. Olaf College in Minnesota, based the book on Norwegian-American experience. The novel first appeared in Norwegian in two parts in 1924 and 1925, with an English version in 1927. Its world is structured by U.S. land policies, territorial governance centered at Yankton, and the expanding reach of railroads and rural churches that ordered life on the prairie.

Rölvaag’s settlers emerged from the long Norwegian emigration that carried hundreds of thousands to North America between the 1840s and 1920s. Economic pressure on small farms, limited land under Norway’s odel rights, population growth, and periodic agricultural downturns spurred departures. Steamship routes after the 1860s shortened crossings and lowered costs, while letters and guidebooks encouraged chain migration to the Upper Midwest. Norwegian communities concentrated in Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, and the Dakotas, where climate and wheat culture resembled parts of Scandinavia. Emigrant aid societies and Lutheran networks eased the journey and helped newcomers find claims, employment, and fellowship in scattered prairie settlements.

Homesteading framed daily life. Under the 1862 Homestead Act, adults could acquire 160 acres by filing, improving the land, and residing on it for five years, or by commutation after six months. The 1873 Timber Culture Act offered additional acreage if trees were planted, and preemption laws allowed earlier claims to be purchased. Surveyors marked the rectangular townships that organized settlement and disputes. Railroads, empowered by federal land grants, fueled migration: the Northern Pacific, Great Northern, and Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul lines advertised in Scandinavian newspapers, ran immigrant cars, and sold land, promising markets, freight service, and town sites.

The prairies settlers entered were Indigenous homelands. In the northern Plains, Dakota and Lakota communities faced accelerating dispossession through treaties and war. A 1858 treaty with the Yankton Sioux ceded land in southeastern Dakota; after the 1862 U.S.–Dakota War in Minnesota, many Dakota were expelled or confined. The 1868 Fort Laramie Treaty created the Great Sioux Reservation, but the Black Hills were seized after 1877, and further allotment policies shrank Native landholdings. By the 1870s and 1880s, much of southeastern Dakota Territory was open to homesteading, and reservation boundaries constrained Native mobility, shaping encounters and anxieties on the frontier.

Settler agriculture on the Plains demanded adaptation to an austere environment. Timber was scarce, so families built soddies or dugouts, hauled water, and burned hay, twisted grass, or cow chips for fuel. Wheat and oats dominated

plantings, but weather and pests were decisive. Waves of Rocky Mountain locusts from 1873 to 1877 devastated crops across Minnesota and Dakota Territory. Severe winters, notably 1880–81 and the notorious January 1888 blizzard, imperiled travel and livestock. The Long Depression beginning in 1873 depressed grain prices, so cash-poor homesteaders often relied on credit at country stores while distant markets determined their fortunes.

Community life cohered around churches, schools, and township government. Norwegian Lutherans organized congregations under synods such as the Norwegian Synod and the later Hauge Synod, holding services in homes or schoolhouses until they could build. Pastors circulated over long circuits, and lay leaders sustained catechism, hymnody, and mutual aid. County seats, land offices, and juries handled claims, naturalization, and disputes, while one-room schools taught children in English and, in many parishes, in Norwegian. Newspapers in Norwegian and English linked scattered farms to regional markets and politics, reinforcing both ethnic cohesion and the pressures of participation in American civic life.

Rölvaag’s perspective grew from his own settlement in Union County, South Dakota, his study and teaching of Norwegian literature at St. Olaf College, and his advocacy for bilingual, bicultural education among Norwegian Americans. Writing during the 1920s, he drew on realist and naturalist traditions to challenge sentimental frontier mythmaking. The Norwegian texts appeared in 1924–1925 through a Norwegian-American press, and Rölvaag collaborated with Lincoln Colcord on the 1927 English

edition. His lectures and essays opposed hasty Americanization and defended immigrant languages and traditions, a stance sharpened by World War I–era nativism and new federal immigration quotas enacted in 1921 and 1924.

Within that history, the novel presents homesteading as both nation-building and ordeal, mirroring documented hardships of isolation, crop failure, and precarious credit that tested families on the Plains. It situates Norwegian settlers within church, school, and township institutions while acknowledging the contested ground of Dakota homelands. By emphasizing endurance, conscience, and cultural memory rather than easy triumph, Rölvaag’s story implicitly critiques booster rhetoric that promised effortless prosperity and rapid assimilation. Published amid restrictive immigration laws and language controversies, the work affirms the worth of immigrant traditions and exposes the psychological and ethical costs that underlay the United States’ westward expansion.

Giants in the Earth: A Saga of the Prairie

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FOREWORD

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In offering this novel to the English-reading public, I feel the need of an explanation. Book I of *Giants in the Earth* was published in Norway (Aschehoug & Co.) as a separate volume in October, 1924; Book II, one year later.

I am aware of the slight similarity existing between Johan Bojer's *The Emigrants* and certain portions of the First Book of my novel; and lest the reader should consider me guilty of having plagiarized him, I find it necessary to offer the information that *The Land-Taking* was in the hands of the Norwegian book dealers a little better than one month before Bojer's book appeared. In a letter to me, dated January 11, 1925, Mr. Bojer writes: "It certainly was fortunate for me that I got my book finished when I did. Had it appeared much later, I should have been accused of having plagiarized you."

The work of translating this novel has been a difficult task. The idiom of the characters offered serious problems. These settlers came from Nordland, Norway; and though the novel is written in the literary language of Norway, the speech of the characters themselves naturally had to be strongly colored by their native dialect; otherwise their utterances would have sounded stilted and untrue. To get these people to reveal clearly and effectively their psychology in English speech seemed at times impossible; for the idioms of a dialect are well-nigh untranslatable. A liberal use of footnotes was unavoidable.

If the old saying, that many cooks spoil the broth, is true, then surely the English text cannot be of much account; for many have worked at it. The following friends have helped with the translation: Mr. Ansten Anstensen, Columbia University; Miss Ruth Lima, Concordia College, Moorhead, Minnesota; Dr. Nils Flaten, Miss Nora Solum, Prof. Olav Lee, Miss Esther Gulbrandsen--all four of whom are fellow teachers in St. Olaf College; and Atty. John Heitmann, Duluth, Minnesota. I feel also greatly indebted to Dr. and Mrs. Clarence Berdahl, University of Illinois, for their many valuable suggestions and corrections. What I asked of these friends was a literal translation. They complied so willingly and so cheerfully. I take this opportunity to thank them all!

But most of all do I owe gratitude to my friend Lincoln Colcord, Minneapolis, Minnesota, who unified and literally rewrote the English text. As I got the translation from the others, I would wrestle with it for a while, and then send it on to him. When he had finished a division he and I would come together to work it over, he reading the manuscript aloud, I checking with the text of the original. How intensely we struggled with words and sentences! It would happen frequently that several pages had to be rewritten. But he never tired. His has been a real *labor amoris.* Were it not for his constant encouragement and for his inimitable willingness to help, this novel would most likely never have seen the light of day in an English translation.

St. Olaf College,
Northfield, Minnesota,
July 15, 1927
O. E. Rölvaag

Introduction

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I

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It is a unique experience, all things considered, to have this novel by O. E. Rölvaag, so palpably European in its art and atmosphere, so distinctly American in everything it deals with. Translations from European authors have always been received with serious consideration in the United States; in Rölvaag we have a European author of our own--one who writes in America, about America, whose only aim is to tell of the contributions of his people to American life; and who yet must be translated for us out of a foreign tongue. I think I am right in stating that this is the first instance of the kind in the history of American letters.

There are certain points of technique and construction which show at a glance that the author of this book is not a native American. Rölvaag is primarily interested in psychology, in the unfolding of character; the native American writer is primarily interested in plot and incident. Rölvaag is preoccupied with the human cost of empire building, rather than with its glamour and romance. His chief character, Beret, is a failure in terms of pioneer life; he aims to reveal a deeper side of the problem, by showing the distress of one who could not take root in new soil. Beret's homesickness is the dominant *motif* of the tale. Even Per Hansa, the natural-born pioneer, must give his life before

the spirit of the prairie is appeased. This treatment reflects something of the gloomy fatalism of the Norse mind; but it also runs close to the grim reality of pioneering, a place the bravest art would want to occupy. *Giants in the Earth* never turns aside from the march of its sustained and inevitable tragedy. The story is told almost baldly at times, but with an unerring choice of simple human detail. When we lay it down we have gained a new insight into the founding of America.

II

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Ole Edvart Rölvaag was born April 22, 1876, in a small settlement on the island of Dönna, in the district of Helgeland, just south of where the Arctic Circle cuts the coast of Norway. The place is far up in the Nordland. Strictly speaking, the settlement has no name; the cove where it lies is called *Rölvaag* on the map, but it is merely an outskirt of one of the voting precincts on the island. Rölvaag, it will be seen, took his place name after coming to America; he has explained this practice in a footnote in the present work. His father's Christian name was Peder, and in Norway he would have been Pedersen; his own sons, in turn, would have been Olsen. The name is pronounced with umlauted ö rolled a little, as in *world;* the last syllable, *aag,* is like the first syllable in *auger.*

All the people in this settlement were fishermen. In summer they fished in small open boats, coming home every night; in winter they went in larger boats, carrying crews of from four to six men, to the historic fishing grounds off the Lofoten Islands**[1]**, where the Maelstrom runs and the coast stretches away to North Cape and beyond. It was a life full of hardship and danger, with sorrow and poverty standing close at hand. The midnight sun shone on them for a season; during the winter they had the long darkness. The island of Dönna is a barren rock covered with gorse and heather--hardly a tree in sight. It looks like a bit of the coast of Labrador. An opening between low ledges of granite marks the cove named *Rölvaag;* at the head of the cove the

houses of the settlement stand out stark and unprotected against the sky line. Behind them loom the iron mountains of the coast. A gloomy, desolate scene--a perilous stronghold on the fringe of the Arctic night. There Rölvaag's forebears had lived, going out to the fisheries, since time immemorial.

His father, who is still alive, is the image of a New England sea captain. The family must have been a remarkable one. An uncle, his father's brother, had broken away from the fishing life and made himself a teacher of prominence in a neighbouring locality. An older brother had the mind of a scholar; but something happened--he went on with the fishing, and died long ago. There was a brilliant sister, also, who died young. These two evidently overshadowed Rölvaag while he was growing up; his case as a child seemed hopeless--he could not learn. Nevertheless, he had a little schooling, mostly of a semireligious nature. The school lay seven miles away, across the rocks and moors; that gave him a fourteen-mile walk for his daily education. He went to school nine weeks a year, for seven years. This ended at the age of fourteen, when his father finally told him that he was not worth educating. That was all the schooling he had in Norway.

Once during the period of childhood he was walking in the dusk with his mother; they had been gathering kelp on the rocks which they boiled and fed to the cattle; and now they were on their way home. His mother took him by the hand and asked him what he wanted to be when he grew up. "I want to be a poet," he told her. This was the only time he ever revealed himself to a member of his family. He

present-day North and South Dakota and eventually into the Missouri River; in 19th-century settlement it was commonly used as a geographic landmark by homesteaders and travelers.

73 Dakota Territory was an organized U.S. territory from about 1861 until 1889 that covered the area now comprising North and South Dakota (and at times parts of adjacent areas); it was dissolved when the two Dakotas were admitted to the Union as states in 1889.

74 A biblical name for the region roughly corresponding to parts of modern Israel, the Palestinian territories, Lebanon and adjacent areas; in the Hebrew Bible it is the land promised to the Israelites.

75 A biblical expression referring to the descendants of Jacob (also called Israel); it denotes the ancient Israelite people described in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament).

76 ‘Vossings’ denotes people from Voss (a town and district in western Norway); here it refers to Norwegian immigrant settlers or their descendants who originated from Voss, as used in 19th-century Norwegian-American contexts.

77 A traditional Norwegian dairy product of thick, clotted or soured cream (similar to clabber or crème fraîche) used as a spread or accompaniment; recipes and exact names vary regionally.

78 A local civil officer empowered to perform minor judicial and administrative duties—such as officiating marriages, witnessing oaths, and handling small claims—with specific powers and selection methods varying by place and historical period; on frontier settlements this was often an elected community role.

79 A date in the Western Christian liturgical calendar that counts Sundays following Trinity Sunday (the first Sunday after Pentecost); its exact calendar date shifts each year because it is tied to Easter and movable feasts.

80 Formal clerical vestments (including robes and the ruff mentioned in the passage) worn by clergy; such liturgical dress was common in Scandinavian Lutheran and other Christian traditions in earlier centuries (roughly 17th–19th centuries).

81 A Scandinavian church official who combined some duties of a cantor (leading or assisting in singing) and a sexton (caretaker/assistants for services); the klokker historically helped conduct worship and maintained church order and property.

82 A clerical garment—typically a long black gown—worn by Christian ministers during services; here it signals the pastor’s official and liturgical dress.

83 Refers to periodic outbreaks of grasshoppers/locusts that devastated prairie crops in the 19th century, a common cause of famine and hardship for settlers.

84 A compound personal name in the text: 'Peder' is the Scandinavian form of Peter, while 'Victorious' is an epithet meaning 'triumphant' or 'conqueror'; together they form an unusual, emphatic given name.

85 A biblical term referring to Jesus of Nazareth and by extension to his followers; in Christian usage of the period, calling someone a ‘Nazarene’ often meant dedicating or marking them as a devout Christian or one set apart for God.

86 Uses ‘schooners’ metaphorically for ‘prairie schooners’—the covered wagons used by settlers in the American West during the mid- to late-19th century, so called because they resembled ships moving across the open prairie.

87 A Christian sacrament (also called the Eucharist) in which participants receive consecrated bread and wine; in 19th-century Norwegian-American Lutheran practice it was a formal service often including confession and absolution.

88 A small flat plate used in Christian liturgy to hold the bread (the host) during the Eucharist, typically placed on the altar alongside the chalice.

89 A dwelling built from sod—rectangular blocks of prairie turf—commonly used by settlers on the North American Great Plains when lumber was scarce. Such "sod houses" were typical of late 19th–early 20th century prairie settlement and are mentioned here as the location of the Communion service.

90 A building made from sod—blocks of prairie turf—used by 19th-century Great Plains settlers when timber was scarce; such sod structures provided insulation but were vulnerable to leaks and decay.

91 A 19th-century usage meaning a temporary bout of illness, fainting, or seizure-like attack rather than magic; in historical texts it typically denotes a sudden medical episode without specifying a diagnosis.

92 A traditional folk remedy consisting of hot milk mixed with pepper (or another spicy ingredient) that was commonly used in rural households to treat colds or induce

sweating in the 19th–early 20th centuries, not a modern medically validated cure.

93 A biblical reference to the flood narrative in the Book of Genesis; saying something was ‘as in the days of Noah’ evokes a catastrophic, land-covering flood and the story of Noah’s Ark.

94 To 'bank in' with straw means to pile straw up against and around the poles or walls of the shed to insulate and shelter the interior from wind and cold, a common practice for protecting livestock in severe winter weather.

95 A Norwegianized nickname used in the text for “Crazy Bridget”; ‘Kræsi’ approximates the English ‘crazy’ and ‘Brita/Brita’ corresponds to the female name Bridget, showing how Norwegian settlers adapted a nickname for an Irish woman in their community.

96 The phrase "Dakota prairie" denotes the broad grassland region of the northern Great Plains—largely the area of present-day North and South Dakota and adjacent territory—during the late 19th-century settlement and homesteading era (roughly the 1870s–early 1900s).

97 A private liberal arts college in Northfield, Minnesota, founded by Norwegian-American Lutherans in 1874; it has long been associated with Norwegian immigrant communities and Lutheran higher education in the Upper Midwest.

98 Name of a Norwegian-language newspaper published in Chicago that served the Norwegian-American community; it reported news and cultural topics for immigrants in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.