

In 1865, C. F. Diriks, superintendent of lighthouses in Norway, then a man of 51 years of age, and P. F. Steensballe together planned the publication of a selection of the former's sketches made on his journey throughout the country. These sketches bore no resemblance to any of those known to us through our previously sparing art of illustration. The idea of publishing them as purely sketch series, unaccompanied by text was also an innovation, so that on the whole, the publisher was up against a somewhat venturesome experiment, and the first number, published by Steensballe at Christmas bore evidence of this.

«Sketches from Travels» consisted of six pen-and-ink drawings in a cheap lithographic reproduction, bound in thin, poor paper, and the publication was conspicuous for being entirely without any indication as to the author of the sketches or the publisher.

The sketches, which were an annual recurrence for a number of years, portray everyday life among the people with whom Diriks came in contact on his travels. They give us in their own way, the first wholly realistic pictures of folk-life, unencumbered by the school of art controlling the taste of the time. That, however, which after all these years retains its power over us, is first and foremost the fact that they with humorous means — a new adventure in itself in this country — show up the small weaknesses of the people, with an understanding born of a noble mind filled with tender warm-heartedness. These are the grounds on which Diriks has become a classic, and it is the rich and charming humour in his sketches which chiefly appeals to us. The success was such, that it was very evident that a change in the somewhat dull book-world had been anticipated for some time.

As time passed, Diriks' sketches became nothing short of an institution, something one could rely upon, something one could depend upon finding in the book shops as Christmas presents, and co-operation between him and his publisher was first concluded in 1882 with the final number «Allspice» (Allehaande).

Only the 26 sketches from «Sketches from Travelling in Norway» are published now in a new edition. They were

issued for the first time in four numbers, during the years 1865—1868, and were immediately followed by new editions showing only small variations in sketches and text. It is impossible to say how many of each of the drawings were printed in all, but it must have been many thousands. It is, however, perfectly certain that they obtained a circulation which far overreached any previous editions of any book in this country.

After «Sketches from Travelling in Norway», there followed new sketch series. Altogether, Steensballe published more than a hundred pen-sketches by Diriks. These sketches, however, are only a small part of his rich production. Diriks sketched continually, indoors and out, when travelling and in his leisure moments. Fortunately, we have preserved — in the University library and with private owners — hundreds of these sketches done by pen, pencil and in colours, among them being a number of Norwegian nature studies from all parts of the country.

We must attempt to understand Diriks as he really was, a sensitive soul with the ambitions and dreams of the artist, at the same time appreciating the fact that he retained the stamp of the amateur which suits him so well.

Diriks has obtained rank through these sketches; not only as the pleasant person we are so fortunate in meeting; not only because he has introduced a new, refreshing and life-giving element at a time when gravity was on the point of crushing us; not only because of his faculty of placing the funniest situations with untractable people in the chief roles in a conciliating light; but also because his truthful, lightly caricatured natural pictures of folk-life are wells of knowledge pertaining to incidents in travel life which otherwise would have been lost.

It is now 80 years since the first number of «Sketches from Travels in Norway» was published. It is also exactly 50 years after the death of Diriks that this new edition of his sketches is issued. A double jubilee may thus be celebrated this year, giving, I think, the new edition additional value.

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