

## **Nobel Prize in Literature 1903**



**Bjørnstjerne Martinus Bjørnson**

The Nobel Prize in Literature 1903 was awarded to Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson *"as a tribute to his noble, magnificent and versatile poetry, which has always been distinguished by both the freshness of its inspiration and the rare purity of its spirit"*.

### **RESEARCH INFORMATION:**

Again this year the names of several candidates for the Nobel Prize in Literature have been submitted to the Swedish Academy for its approval; some of them are authors of European reputation. The Academy thinks that this year it should give priority to the poet Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson. Although we have the pleasure of seeing the illustrious laureate at this ceremony, custom requires that I speak of him in the third person as I give an account of the Academy's decision. But I reserve the right to address a few personal remarks to him at the end.

Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson is so generally known and his works are so familiar to educated Swedes that it is unnecessary to give a comprehensive appreciation of his universally and gladly acknowledged merits. Therefore I shall limit myself on this solemn occasion to the following remarks.

The poet to whom with true satisfaction the Swedish Academy has awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature was born at Kvikne, Norway, where his father was a minister and

where as a child he could listen to the waters of the Orkla boiling at the bottom of a gorge. The last years of his childhood were, however, spent at Naeset in the beautiful valley of Romsdal where his father had been transferred. The vicarage of Naeset is situated between the two inlets of Langfjord, Eidsvaag and Eirisfjord. In that picturesque countryside of Norway, between these two fjords, the young boy often looked at the splendour of the sun setting behind the mountain or in the sea. There he learned to do farmwork. His love of the rustic nature of his country and his intimate knowledge of the life of the people date from that time. At the age of eleven he was sent to school at Molde. He did not do brilliantly, but the development of a great poet is not always measured by such standards. During his studies he came across one author who was to have a profound influence on his life: he began to read Sturleson. At this period, too, he became acquainted with the stories of Asbjørnson and the works of Oehlenschläger and Walter Scott. At the age of seventeen he went to Christiania (Oslo) to prepare for his baccalaureate, which he passed in 1852. Bjørnson has said that he knew of his poetic vocation after he took part in the First Student Assembly in Uppsala in 1856. In unforgettable words he has given us his impressions of the church of Riddarholm lit up by the rays of the setting sun, and of Stockholm in the splendour of the summer. Then he wrote *Mellem slagene* (1857) [Between the Battles] in a fortnight, to be followed by other works, among them the story *Synnøve Solbakken* (1857) [*Sunny Hill*]. Henceforth the reputation of Bjørnson was solidly established and an uninterrupted series of new works spread his name all over the world.

Bjørnson is a great epic and dramatic writer, but he is also a great lyric poet. *Synnøve Solbakken*, *Arne* (1858), and *En glad gut* (1860) [*A Happy Boy*] put him in the first rank of painters of contemporary life. In these sombre accounts he reveals himself as a man of the country and of the old saga; indeed it has been said, not without reason, that he describes the life of the peasant in the light of saga. But it should be added that the peasants whom he knew so well since his Romsdal days have - in the judgments of competent persons - preserved the laconic and reserved manner of talking which the poet has

reproduced with such felicity. Although this reproduction is idealized and profoundly poetic, it is nonetheless faithful and true to nature.

As a dramatist Bjørnson has treated historical subjects, e.g. *Kong Sverre* (1861), *Sigurd Jorsalafar* (1872) [Sigurd the Crusader], the masterly *Sigurd Slembe* (1862) [Sigurd the Bad], in which the love of Audhild brings some light into a sombre situation and where the figure of Finnepiggen stands in the splendour of an aurora borealis, the passionate drama *Maria Stuart i Shotland* (1864), and other creations of genius. But he has been equally successful in his choice of contemporary subjects, as in *Redaktøren* (1874) [The Editor], *En fallit* (1874) [The Bankrupt], etc. Even as an old man he has created a disinterested portrait of love in *Paul Lange og Tora Parsberg* (1898); in *Laboremus* (1901) he has extolled the right of the moral life against the natural forces of unrestrained passion. Finally, in *På Storhove* (1902) [At Storhove] he has paid dramatic homage to the guardian forces of the home as represented by Margareta, the faithful and constant support of her family. It should in fact be observed that Bjørnson's characters are of a rare purity, that his genius is always positive and in no way negative. His works are never adulterated; on the contrary they are pure metal, and whatever modifications the years and experience have imposed upon his point of view and that of others, he has never ceased to combat the claim of the senses to dominate man.

It is sometimes said that the Nobel Prize in Literature, designed for the best literary work, should preferably be awarded to young writers. That may be true, but even so the Academy believes it has met all reasonable demands.

The creative power of this man of seventy-one is so great that he published *På Storhove* in 1902, and the works published afterward bear witness to the youthful spirit that he has been able to preserve.

As a lyric poet Bjørnson is exemplary by his fresh simplicity and his profound sentiments. His poems are an inspirational source of inexhaustible wealth, and the melodious character of his verse has tempted many a composer to set it to music... No country has a more beautiful anthem than «Ja, vi elsker dette Landet» [Yes, we love this

country] by Bjørnson, and when one reads the sublime song of «Arnljot Gelline», in which the rhythms are like the majestic movements of waves, one likes to think that in future times the waves of memory will murmur «i store maaneskinsklare Naetter» [in clear moonlit nights] as they play the name of the great national poet on the coasts of Norway.

Mr. Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson - Your genius has served the purest and most elevated ideas; it has put the highest demands on human life, in certain cases (*En hanske*, 1883 [*A Gauntlet*] ) even thought too high by many. But in their noble severity they are infinitely preferable to the laxness that is all too prevalent in the literature of our day. Your inspired and universally acknowledged poetic achievement, rooted in nature and in the life of the people as well as in strong personal convictions, combines morality and a healthy poetic freshness. Hence the Swedish Academy has seen fit to render homage to your illustrious genius by awarding you the Nobel Prize for this year, and it respectfully asks His Majesty the King to deign to give you this proof of its admiration.

***For more details please visit:***

[http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/1903/press.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1903/press.html)