

Amalie Skram as a Travel Writer

Janet Garton

Amalie Skram (1846–1905) was a well-travelled writer – extraordinarily so according to the standards of her time and the expectations of her gender. She was born and grew up in Bergen, originally a Hanseatic seaport which was the focal point for trading along Norway’s extensive western coast, and which in the mid-nineteenth century had far stronger links with other European ports than with the capital Kristiania. The rail link between the two Norwegian cities was not finished until 1894, and the people of Bergen remained fiercely independent and outward-looking.

The young Amalie Alver was the second child and oldest daughter of Mons Monsen Alver (1819–98), a shop assistant who worked his way up to become a partner in the business and buy a comfortable family house in the mercantile district. Amalie was a quick-witted and vivacious child with a love of adventure – and according to her brother Ludvig, more than a bit of a tomboy: *‘som en gut mere end som en pige i sine interesser og sit væsen, altid parat til at gjøre erfaringer, nysgjerrig og vovsø og ikke rød for at begi sig ud paa ukjendte, farlige veie*¹ (‘more

1. Letter from Ludvig Alver to Gerhard Gran, 14 August 1896. The National Library of Norway, Oslo, Brevsamling nr. 117. Unless otherwise indicated, the translations in this article are this author’s.

like a boy than a girl in her interests and her being, always ready to experience new things, curious and bold and not afraid of following unknown and dangerous paths'). She would roam around the town and the harbour, observing the bustling trading scenes and eager to investigate the less salubrious areas, the narrow back streets and alleyways with their inns and snugs, their drunks and their squalor – all of it rich material for her later writing.

Despite the family's apparent prosperity, however, all was not well. They were living beyond their means; Amalie and her four brothers were educated at the town's best schools, and her father had become embroiled in increasingly unsuccessful speculations to try to make money. In 1864, he was bankrupt and promptly left for America in order to try to restore his fortunes – leaving behind his wife and five children, the oldest of whom, Wilhelm, was nineteen and studying for the priesthood, and the youngest, Bernhard, was nine (five others had died in infancy). Amalie was seventeen, and almost at once accepted a proposal of marriage; it was no doubt in part a decision taken to alleviate her mother's financial burden, but it was probably equally prompted by her desire for adventure. She had grown into a stunningly beautiful young woman and had already received a number of proposals – but the man she chose was August Müller (1837–98), a ship's captain from a respected Bergen family, who could offer her escape and new experiences.

Amalie was married on 3 October 1864, a few weeks after her eighteenth birthday, and soon her travels began in earnest.

Not long after the wedding, she set sail with her new husband on board his ship, the *Admiral Tromp*, a three-masted full-rigged sailing ship bound for exotic ports. This period was the final golden age of sailing, when a ship's captain had extensive authority to decide not only on the course he would sail but also on his cargo and destinations.

Firstly they sailed to London, where they stayed for a while to take on cargo and make preparations for a long voyage, and then they embarked on a journey which was to last for nearly nine months. Their destination was the West Indies. The full itinerary is not recorded, but from Amalie's letters home it is clear that they visited Mexico, Jamaica, and British Honduras, and spent several weeks in Belize. She recounted some of her experiences in a letter written from London in August 1865 to a friend in Bergen, fru Bacher:

Jamaica var et ekkelt sted, svært skummelt og smussig, og folkene var likedan. Vi hadde gudskjelov kun et opphold av 4 uker her, mens vi lå 10 uker i Belize. Det var jo skrekkelig lang tid, men så hadde vi det også så morsomt der, at jeg for min part skulle gjerne ha vært der ennu. Vi var invitert ut hver eneste dag, ja endogså til guvernøren i stor middag. Men rasende varmt var det, det er sant. Luften man innåndet var som ild, og solens stråler var stikkende. Men det var også på den varmeste tid da solen stod like i senit. Vi hadde en reise til London på 7½ uke. Det var lenge, men kunne ha vært verre.²

Jamaica was a horrible place, very unpleasant and dirty, and the people were the same. Thank goodness we only stayed there for 4 weeks, whilst we were 10 weeks in Belize. It was a frightfully long time, but we had such a good time there that for my part I should be happy to be there still. We were invited out every single day, even to the governor's for a grand dinner. But it really was terribly hot. The air you breathed in was like fire, and the sun's rays were scorching. But it was the warmest season, when the sun was at the zenith. Our voyage

2. The letter is dated 3 August 1865 and is reproduced in Kielland 1976: 13–15 (14). Liv Køltzow's biography of Amalie Skram's early life, *Den unge Amalie Skram*, gives an extensive account of her early travels.

to London took 7½ weeks. It was a long time, but could have been worse.

By her own account, Amalie was a born sailor. She enjoyed life on board and claimed never to have been seasick. She was fascinated by the minutiae of the ship's construction and navigation; she was not a passive captain's wife who sat in the cabin and drank tea. Indeed, her husband enrolled her as a member of the crew and paid her a pound a month in wages. She was not afraid to stand on deck in a roaring gale or to haul on ropes alongside the deckhands. The arrival of the ship in foreign ports was usually an event for the local community, and August Müller enjoyed showing off his lovely young wife.

Over the next seven years, Amalie spent much of her life at sea. She had two sons, Jacob and Ludvig, in 1866 and 1868, and they travelled with her on later voyages. Australia, Peru, Cape Horn, the Mediterranean, the Black Sea, Constantinople – she experienced many different lands and peoples, and took her sons with her on a trip around the world, all the time observing and storing up experiences on which she would later draw in her writing. From 1871, she and Müller set up house in Bergen, although he continued to sail until 1876, when he sold his ship and came ashore. He bought a mill at Ask near Bergen, where the family was to settle; but it was only a year later that Amalie asked for a divorce.

Behind the exciting seafaring life and the glittering society in exotic foreign ports, Amalie and August's marriage had been problematic from the start. They were an ill-matched pair; he was a seasoned traveller, used to the rough-and-tumble of a sailor's life with its easy-going acceptance of the double standard (men have sexual adventures; respectable women remain chaste), whereas she – despite her adventurous nature – was a sheltered and immature young bourgeoisie. She had no knowledge of what a husband would expect of her, and the discovery

of the realities of married life was a shock from which she never fully recovered.

During their stay in Belize she had a miscarriage, and on the voyage she was often ill with what seems to have been some kind of hysterical attacks, involving hallucinations and being treated by her husband with opium. She began to find intimate contact unbearable; things were no better after they settled on land, and eventually became so bad that in 1877 she had a breakdown and was admitted to Gaustad psychiatric hospital. It was only after Müller agreed to a divorce that she began to recover.

Leaving him in Bergen, she moved to Western Norway with her two sons to live with her brothers, firstly with Ludvig in Frederikshald and then with Wilhelm in Kristiania. During these relatively settled years she began her writing career, firstly as a literary critic and then, tentatively, as a creative writer.

By the age of twenty-five, then, Amalie Müller's life as a round-the-world voyager was over. After that she never left Europe – but neither did she remain settled in her own country, content to relive her early adventures in her writing.

In August 1882, she attended Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson's jubilee celebrations at Aulestad, and there she met and fell in love with the Danish writer and journalist Erik Skram (1847–1923). There followed two years of intense letter-writing and mutual visits across Kattegat. Amalie visited Copenhagen a few times, travelling the whole way by ship if she possibly could; it was always her preferred mode of travel. Finally, in March 1884, she left Kristiania for good and set sail for Copenhagen with all her worldly goods – but without her sons – to marry Erik and live in Denmark for the rest of her life.³

Amalie Skram, as she then became, embarked on her writing career in earnest when she moved to Denmark; her first novel,

3. For an account of Amalie Skram's later life, see Garton 2011.

Constance Ring, was published in 1885, and over the next fifteen years she published fourteen books, as well as a number of short stories. She did not write travel books as such, but in several of her novels and stories she drew on her experiences to provide a wide variety of characters and locations for her fiction. Most of her novels are set wholly in Norway, but in two of them – *To Venner* ('Two Friends', 1887) and *Forraadt* ('Betrayed', 1892) life at sea is central to the action, whereas a third, *Fru Inés* (1891), is set entirely in Constantinople. And two of the stories in *Børnefortællinger* ('Children's Stories', 1890), 'I det Asowske Hav' ('On the Sea of Asov') and 'Paa Hondurasfloden' ('On the River in Honduras') happen in far-distant climes.

The closest of these stories to the author's actual experience must be the short story 'I det Asovske Hav', which relates an incident on board ship where two small boys are travelling with their father, the ship's captain, and his wife. The story begins calmly enough with the boys quarrelling about learning their lessons while at sea, but quickly takes a dramatic turn as the captain's wife falls into the sea and is nearly drowned before being rescued. The account sounds authentic, down to the boys' wordless terror and the woman's hysterical laughter as she regains consciousness – although there is no record of it having actually happened. The setting of the scene at the beginning of the story, however, bears the unmistakable stamp of first-hand knowledge:

Bjørgvinn laa tilankers i det Asowske Hav et Par Mile fra Kysten sammen med mange andre Dampere og Sejlfartøjer av forskjellige Nationaliteter. Der er nemlig saa grundt Vande ved Kysten, at Skibene ikke kan gaa op til Lossepladsene, men maa bli liggende paa Dybet, hvor Ladningen føres ud i Lægtene.⁴

4. Skram 1911–12, I: 325.

The *Bjergvin* lay at anchor in the Sea of Asov a couple of miles from the coast, together with many other steamers and sailing ships of various nationalities. That is because the waters by the coast are so shallow that ships cannot tie up by the quay to load, but have to stay in deeper waters, while the cargo is ferried out by barges.

‘Paa Hondurasfloden’, on the other hand, seems a more fantastical account of a young European woman visiting an old English vicar and his wife, who minister to the native population in Honduras. But here again the description of the river, flora, and fauna as they are paddled along in a boat and visit a settlement are described in such realistic detail that they must derive from an alert and interested observer. At the edges of the greenish river grow jungles of reeds and enormous water lilies, and the banks are lined with calla, cacti, and palms. The river is full of crocodiles; onshore is a riot of peacocks, turkeys, and parrots; and inside the old lady’s hut roam chickens and her pet deer. Sounds, sights, and smells assault the senses, and there is no attempt to prettify; the young girl is repulsed by the old lady’s face with ‘*den sorte, fremstaaende Mund med de graablege, skorpede Læber*’ (‘the black, pouting mouth with its grey, crusty lips’) which she is required to kiss.⁵

To Venner is the second volume in the series of four novels usually referred to as *Hellemyrsfolket* (‘The People of Hellemyr’), which follows the fortunes of a Bergen family in Zolaesque fashion through several generations, from extreme poverty through relative affluence to an unhappy end, demonstrating the impossibility of escaping the fate predetermined by heredity and environment.⁶ Most of the story takes place in the area

5. Ibid.: 362.

6. *Sjur Gabriel* (1887); *To Venner* (1887); *S.G. Myre* (1890); *Afkom* (‘Descendants’, 1898).

in and around Bergen, but this second volume is an exception; here we follow the adventures of the fifteen-year-old Sivert, grandson of the peasant farmer Sjur Gabriel, who tries to escape the family of which he is ashamed by signing on as a ship's boy and going to sea. The voyage on board *To Venner* takes him via Madeira all the way to Jamaica, where they stay for some time before returning through the Straits of Gibraltar to Marseilles, then to Lisbon to load up with salt, finally setting course to return home to Bergen. At first Sivert is dreadfully seasick and treated harshly by the crew, but gradually he finds his sea legs and starts to pull his weight, earning praise for his stamina and initiative.

The atmosphere of the busy port of Kingston is vividly brought to life in the novel. The captain hires a group of black workers to help load the wood he has bought, which includes a quantity of lignum vitae, a hardwood in which Amalie herself had invested on her first trip to Jamaica. It was a bad investment, she wrote to fru Bacher; after encouraging her to buy it, Müller was unable to sell it on their return, so they had to keep it.

The streets of the town are also described as the young Sivert ventures to explore them, with their crowd of colourful and ragged inhabitants; we see the ramshackle huts with their small parcels of land, an old woman hanging up washing on a myriad of criss-crossing washing lines, a younger woman washing clothes in a tub while her son stands naked in front of her suckling her breast. He makes his way to a brothel frequented by his fellow shipmates, where he is welcomed by the girls and led into a room which makes a pathetic attempt at finery:

Her fik de ham tilsæde i et Monstrum af en Straasofa, der stod i Hjørnet ved Vinduet med et raat forarbejdet Bord foran. I det modsatte Hjørne var en lignende Sofa og nøjagtig det samme

Bord. Paa begge Sider af Indgangsdøren var spændt to Hængekøjer tværs over Værelset med lange Touge, der var fastgjort i Væggen og slæbte henad Gulvets hullede Sivmatten. Paa en af Væggene var anbragt et skabliggende Møbel, hvis Døre stod paa Klem og fremviste nogle Glas og noget brøstfældigt Stentøj, med Skuffer oppe og nede, ud fra hvilke der stak Tøjstumper og Baandstykker. Ovenover Skabet hang farvede Litografier af Dronning Viktoria og Prins Albert i Kroningsdragt samt et med Fluesnaus belagt Spejl. Paa Bordene stod der Glas og tomme Flasker, en halvspist Kokusnød laa paa en Stol, nogle afgnavede Høseben og et Stykke Hvedebrød oppe paa Skabet. Foran Vinduerne hang der Musselinsgardiner med lange Flænger og optræpsede Kanter. To Lamper med fedtede Glas og sprukne Kupler oplyste Rummet.⁷

Here they made him sit down on a monstrous straw sofa, which stood in the corner by the window with a rough-hewn table in front of it. In the opposite corner stood a similar sofa and an exact copy of the table. On both sides of the entrance, two hammocks were slung across the room on long ropes which were fastened to the wall and trailed along the rush matting on the floor, which was full of holes. Along one of the walls stood a kind of cupboard, its doors hanging open to show some glasses and some chipped crockery, with drawers above and below, out of which pieces of material and ribbon were spilling. Above the cupboard hung coloured lithographs of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert in coronation robes, together with a mirror covered with flyspecks. On the table stood glasses and empty bottles, a half-eaten coconut lay on a stool, and there were some gnawed chicken bones and a piece of bread on top of the cupboard. In front of the windows hung muslin curtains with long rips in them and frayed

7. Skram 1911–12, II: 132.

edges. The room was lit by two lamps with smeared glass and cracked globes.

The description of these seedy premises is so acute that the reader wonders whether Amalie Skram is writing from first-hand experience; if not, she must have seen something very like it.

As the ship prepares to leave Kingston, there is an addition to the company; two Frenchmen, a botanist and a zoologist, come aboard together with the specimens they have collected for Jardin des Plantes in Paris. They arrive with two large carts of luggage – not only plants but also a menagerie of living specimens, including birds, turtles, snakes, crocodiles, porcupines, fish, and tiger cubs. Their presence enlivens the journey and provides some humour in their attempts to communicate; both they and the ship's crew speak only rudimentary English. After they and their cargo have been dropped off in Marseilles, life on board is dull – until the ship is a couple of days out from Lisbon, where they run into a terrible storm.

The storm itself and the reactions of the crew as the water in the hold rises and the pumps fail is described with frightening intensity; the lamps are smashed, the masts snap, and the tiller and helmsman are washed overboard as Sivert is posted to keep watch – and finally catches sight of an approaching steamer. The novel ends as the surviving crew launch the lifeboat and row towards their salvation. That is the end of Sivert's adventures at sea.

There are many testimonies to the fact that Amalie Skram knew what she was talking about when she described life on board a sailing ship, perhaps none more heartfelt than that from an old sailor in Bergen, who thirty years later borrowed the novel from Amalie's son Ludvig Müller and returned it with the following words of praise: '*Og To Venner!!! Vet De, Møller*

– der er ikke en eneste manøvreringsfeil i hele boken! Hvorledes tror De, det vilde gaa med skutene i «sjøromanerne» ellers? De vilde søkke ner paa hver eneste sides vildene hav!⁸ (‘And To Venner!!! You know, Møller – there isn’t a single navigational mistake in the whole novel! How do you think things would go with sailing craft in “sea novels” otherwise? They would be scuttled on every page of stormy seas!’)

A quite different life at sea is portrayed in the novel Amalie Skram published five years later, *Forraadt*. The ship, however, is of the same kind, the one she had sailed with and knew intimately, a three-masted full-rigged sailing bark. The *Orion* is captained by Captain Adolph Riber from Bergen, a bluff and good-natured sailor who has done well for himself and decides it is time to complete his good fortune by taking a wife. He marries for love, choosing a very young and beautiful girl who he thinks will be easy to mould into the supportive companion he seeks. She is to be a captain’s wife on board ship, and straight after the marriage they set sail for London, before crossing the Atlantic to America.

It is easy to see from the descriptions in the novel that Amalie Skram had been in London in 1864 with August Müller. Fashions and places in the city in the mid-nineteenth century are brought vividly to life, as Riber and Aurora (Ory) visit the Alhambra theatre, eat oysters in Maiden Lane, go shopping near St Paul’s Churchyard and finally go on board in Victoria Docks. The decor of the boarding house in which they stay in Cheapside, with its Irish landlady with the false hair braids and the rasping voice, sounds depressingly familiar:

[...] at sidde her hele Dagen, stængt inde i dette frygtelige Værelse, med denne beklumrede, engelske Stenkulslugt, hvor der altid var

8. Müller 1917.

halvmørkt, hvor Hestehaarsmøblerne ganske sikkert aldrig havde været banket eller luftet ud, og hvor Stolene var saa tunge og store, at hun maatte bruge begge Hænder for at flytte dem. [...] Ikke engang Kaminen, hvis blanke Marmorgesims og skinnende Messinggelænder Ory straks var blit saa indtat i, havde hun mere nogen Hygge af at se paa. Ikke engang naar der var Ild i den som nu. For det store, forgyldte Spejl ovenover var saa fedtet og plettet, at ikke engang Gaskronen, som hang nedover Midtbordet, kunde spejle sig ordentlig i det, og de kunstige Blomster og brogede Fugle paa Gesimsen var saa støvede og smudsige, at man ikke kunde se, hvad de var gjort af.⁹

[...] sitting here all day, cooped up in this awful room filled with suffocating English coal fumes, where it was always half-dark, where the horsehair furniture had probably never been beaten or aired, and where the chairs were so massive and heavy she had to use both hands to move them. [...] Not even the fireplace with its gleaming white marble mantelpiece and shiny brass fender, which Ory had liked so much at first, pleased her any more. Not even now with a fire blazing. The large gilt mirror above it was so greasy and spotted that even the reflection of the gas chandelier hanging over the centre of the table was blurred, and the artificial flowers and multicoloured birds on the mantelpiece were so grimy and dusty that it was hard to tell what they were made of.¹⁰

The less salubrious side of London life is also much in evidence here, as Riber conducts Ory around the dance halls and public bars, keen to show off his lovely wife – whereas what she notices is his easy familiarity with the scantily clad and brazen

9. Skram 1911–12, I: 386–387.

10. Skram 2018: 25–26.

women who cross their path, as she begins to suspect that there is a part of his life which is quite different from the respectable façade he maintains back home in Norway.

When they finally set sail for America, more than halfway through the novel, we follow in detail Ory's observations of life on board ship. The characters of the seamen are boldly drawn, from the quarrelsome first mate to the eager but clumsy ship's boy Halfdan – a lad Ory remembers from school. And the overall design of the ship, from rigging to messrooms, is minutely described. Ory's first impressions of the captain's sleeping quarters, with its nautical flavour and economical use of space, are drawn from life:

Gulvet var bedækket af storrudet Voksdug i graa og røde Farver, Magen til den i Kahytten. Paa den ene Langvæg var der en høj Seng, bygget fast i Væggen med 3 Rader Skuffer under, og en Tophimmel, hvorfra der faldt ned mørkegrønne Sirtsgardiner med hvidblomstret Mønster. Paa Tværvæggen tæt ved Sengen en Egetræsservante med Laag, og en høj Chiffoniere. Paa den anden Langvæg ligeoverfor Sengen stod nede ved Gulvet en lang, smal Kasse. Ory løfted paa Laaget og saa, at den var fuld af sammenrullede Søkort. Paa den fjerde Væg fandtes, foruden den portierebehængte Indgang til Salonen, et højt, fladt, hvidlakeret Skab med en Klap paa Midten og Skuffer oppe og nede.¹¹

The floor was covered with oil cloth, a checkered pattern of large grey and red checks, the same as in the day cabin. Against one wall was a high bed, secured to the wall, with three drawers underneath and a canopy above, draped with dark green calico curtains that had a white floral pattern. On the short wall right next to the bed was an oak washstand

11. Skram 1911–12, I: 429–430.

with a lid and a tall chiffonier. Against the wall across from the bed was a long, narrow chest. Ory lifted the top and saw that it was full of rolled up navigation charts. On the fourth wall there was, besides the curtained doorway to the day cabin, a tall, slim white lacquered cabinet with a leaf in the middle and drawers above and below.¹²

Like Amalie, Ory is a good sailor, unperturbed by wind and storms. What sends her into a state of shock is discovering that Riber is not the chaste and clean-living man she had believed him to be but a reprobate who has had mistresses in several ports and even been previously engaged. Her determination to discover the details of his past excesses, at the same time as she denies him any sexual release, drives him into increasingly desperate bafflement and frustration. Meanwhile, as if in a mirror image of the stagnation of their relationship, the *Orion* becomes becalmed in Florida Bay. Tension rises in the oppressive heat and stillness, as the couple, trapped day after day in the narrow confines of the vessel where neither can find any refuge from the other or even space for a brief respite from enforced cohabitation, become estranged to the point where the only way out is overboard.¹³

In *Fru Inés*, the protagonist is again an unhappily married woman, this time a Spanish Levantine who is the wife of von Ribbing, the Swedish consul in Constantinople. Her husband is an irascible and much older man, and Inés has taken to banter and flirting with several admirers in order to surround herself with an illusion of gaiety to disguise her inner desolation. She embarks on an affair with a young Swedish businessman in an effort to experience the happiness of sexual fulfilment of

12. Skram 2018: 78–79.

13. There is a fuller exploration of the novel's themes and conflicts in the Afterword to my recent edition of the novel, Skram 2021: 131–167.

which she has heard; but the inexperienced Arthur Flemming is unable to satisfy her. Broken-hearted when she rejects him, he takes his own life, leaving her pregnant and searching desperately for a way out.

Absorbing as the human conflicts are, in many ways it is the city itself which is the protagonist of this novel. Constantinople, with its rich gallery of human characters of many ethnicities and backgrounds, its ancient buildings and crowded streets, is more than just a backdrop to the story; it is an essential part of it.

Whilst she was writing the novel in the spring of 1891, Amalie Skram wrote to her publisher, Paul Langhoff, in order to explain why it was taking her so much longer than she had promised; it was because of the effort involved in recalling to mind all her impressions from the time she'd spent there:

Jeg slider mere med dette arbejde end jeg nogensinde tidligere har gjort. Det er fordi historien foregår i Konstantinopel og fordi jeg må grave og grave i min hjerne for at få levende frem for mig byen, folkene, livet, atmosfæren o.s.v. Det er ikke fordi det nu er 12 år siden, jeg var der sidste gang, men det er fordi alting der er så tusenfold broget og sammensat, så fuldt af farver og rigdom.¹⁴

I'm struggling more with this work than I have ever done before. It is because the story takes place in Constantinople, and because I have to dig and dig in my brain in order to bring to life the city, the people, the life, the atmosphere etc. It is not because it is now 12 years since I was last there, but everything there is so enormously multifaceted and complex, so full of colour and richness.

14. Letter to Paul Langhoff from March 1891, in Garton 2010: 90.

There are many different settings in the novel, reflecting the differences of wealth and class of its inhabitants. It begins in the quiet luxury of a hotel on Prinkipo Island in the Sea of Marmara where Inés and her entourage are staying, and then moves to her city residence in the Grande Rue de Pera with its balcony supported by Ionic columns, set in a spacious garden with a lawn, fountains, and tropical plants, and an allée of acacias. Inés and Flemming stroll through the streets, take the funicular up to the higher part of town, eat in the restaurant pavilion in Bosphorus Park, and visit the silent cemetery with its hundred-year-old cypresses. All around them, meanwhile, is the crush and clamour of the streets where an exotic mêlée of people and animals jostle for space:

De begyndte langsomt at stige opover de ujevnt slidte Stentrin, hvor pustende Fodgjængere i Turbaner og Tyrkebukser, i græske Nationaldragter, i armeniske Præstekitler ased i vej mellem guldbroderte Albanesere og mørkkledte Europæere med Fez og tvivlsomme Damer. Et Par kaade Ryttere kom sprængende i Galop paa styrtefærdige Lejeheste. En af dem strøg saa tæt forbi Inés, at Flemming hurtig maatte rive hende til Side, for at hun ikke skulde blive rendt overende. Straks efter fik hun et Puf i Ryggen af nogle tyrkeklædte Portechaisebærere, der lakonisk gik videre med sit forgyldte Bur, fra hvis Vindu et tilsløret Kvindeansigt titted ud.¹⁵

They began to climb slowly up the uneven, worn stone steps, where puffing pedestrians in turbans and Turkish trousers, in Greek national costumes, and in Armenian clerical robes were struggling along among gold-embroidered Albanians and dark-clad Europeans with fezzes and questionable women.

15. Skram 1911–12, I: 155.

A couple of reckless horsemen came racing at a gallop on horses ready to drop from fatigue. One of them brushed past Inés so closely that Flemming had to hastily pull her aside so she wouldn't be knocked down. Shortly afterwards she was nudged in the back by some Turkish sedan chair bearers who laconically kept walking, bearing their gilded cage from whose window a veiled woman was peeking.¹⁶

As the novel proceeds, the luxurious upper-class districts in which most of the first part is set are gradually replaced by more squalid lower-class environments, mirroring the change in Fru Inés from the over-privileged, haughty consul's wife into a haunted and desperate figure. In a horrifying scene, she watches a pack of stray dogs, of which the streets are full, turn on an outcast dog and rip its skin off; in her feverish imagination, she becomes that dog, mutilated and suffering, looking for a peaceful place to die: '*Nu vidste hun det. Hun var Hunden, og hun skulde dø som den.*'¹⁷ ('Now she knew. She was the dog and she would die like it had.'¹⁸) When she sinks down in a doorway, overcome by cramps, she is helped by the silent, veiled native women with whom she would otherwise have had no contact.

Amalie Skram's efforts at teasing out her memories have produced so much information in this short novel that it could almost be used as a travel guide to the city and the area around it, much of which would still be recognisable today.

After her move to Copenhagen in 1884, Amalie Skram's own travels were mostly limited to visits home to Norway. She went back fairly often, either to visit one of her two sons – Jacob, who had become a student in Kristiania but rapidly gone off the rails and required urgently rescuing from penury and

16. Skram 2014: 65.

17. Skram 1911–12, I: 197.

18. Skram 2014: 139.

drunkenness, or Ludvig, who had started work in Bergen in his uncle Tobias Müller's business and was isolated and unhappy – or to undertake research for her novels, most of which are set in Norway.

Over the years, her opinion of the two countries changed; from being an ardent Norwegian patriot who in her early letters to Erik extolled the sterling virtues of her countrymen as opposed to the weak and unprincipled Danes, she came to appreciate the superiority of Copenhagen as a cultural centre and complain about the backwardness of Norwegians, whom she described in a letter to her German translator Marie Herzfeld in 1893 as a horde of barbarians and parvenues.¹⁹ It was in Denmark and not in Norway where her books were appreciated, and the Danes who eventually awarded her a writer's stipend.

Eventually, in 1901, she published a pamphlet, *Landsforrædere* ('Traitors') in which she declared unequivocally that her loyalties lay with her adopted country. Not for nothing had Georg and Edvard Brandes been writing down here for a generation; it was here that her books had received the kind of recognition which gives an author the courage to carry on writing. And in an article published in Norway a couple of years earlier she had demanded that the words inscribed on her tombstone should be '*Dansk Ægtehustru, dansk Borger, dansk Undersaat og dansk Forfatter*' ('Danish wife, Danish citizen, Danish subject and Danish author').²⁰ With the omission of 'Danish wife' – since she was by that time separated from Erik – this was done.

In the 1890s, Amalie Skram undertook two final extended trips, one east and one west. In February 1894, after a mental breakdown caused by a combination of writer's block and

19. Letter to Marie Herzfeld 18 October 1893. The National Library of Norway, Oslo, Brevsamling nr. 64.

20. 'Et Par Ord fra Amalie Skram'. *Verdens Gang* 26, 31 January 1899.

tensions in her marriage, she agreed to be admitted to the psychiatric ward of Copenhagen Hospital under the care of the physician Knud Pontoppidan. The rest and healing she had hoped for did not materialise; instead she claimed she was treated like a dangerous lunatic, and it was only after two months of unremitting struggle that she was discharged. Normal life could not be resumed straight away; instead, thanks to her devoted friend Ane Cathrine Achen, who collected donations for her from their circle of acquaintances, she was able to undertake a sea voyage to recuperate.

Sofie Horten, a well-known feminist, was about to depart for Finland and suggested to Amalie that she should accompany her, which she did. On 8 May 1894, they sailed on the steamship *Vasa* and were away for several weeks, first in Helsinki and then in St Petersburg, travelling home via Stockholm. We can follow her travels through her letters home to Erik. The largest part of the letters is taken up with describing her own emotions, her sadness at being away from her four-year-old daughter and her unresolved conflicts with her husband. In between, however, she tells of animated social gatherings with cultivated hosts, and above all of her pleasure at being on her travels again:

*Har havt en aldeles storartet rejse. Sejlladsen på Østersøen var som i Pasaten. Fuldstændig! Brilliant kaptejn, hyggeligt rejseselskab, ikke at tale om min rejsefælle, som er udmærket. Kom igårmorges torsdag, kl. 9 til Åbo, den forrige hovedstad. Blev så af kaptejnen inviteret til at gå i land og bese staden, kørte afsted i to vogne, var allevegne, også ombord på 'Vasa', der kl. 4 om eftermiddag skulde afgå til Helsingfors. Blev der presenteret for kaptejnen, der viste sig at være lige så prægtig som ham på 'Estræa' [...]*²¹

21. Letter dated 11 May 1894. See Garton 2002, III: 301.

Have had an absolutely wonderful voyage. Sailing on the Baltic Sea was like going through the Straits. Exactly! Brilliant captain, pleasant company, not to mention my companion, who is excellent. Yesterday morning, Thursday at 9.0, we arrived in Åbo, the former capital. Were invited by the captain to go ashore and see the town, drove off in two carriages, went everywhere, also on board the *Vasa* which was to sail for Helsinki at 4 pm. Were presented to the captain, who turned out to be just as splendid as the one on *Estræa* [...]

Just over a year later, at the end of October 1895, Amalie Skram's travels took her the other way – to Paris, where she was to stay for three months. Paris was at that time a cultural centre and a magnet for Scandinavian writers and artists; the Norwegian writers Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, Camilla Collett, and Knut Hamsun, and the artists Frits Thaulow, Harriet Backer, and Edvard Munch, were among the many who studied and worked there.

Amalie Skram intended to enjoy the cultural activities, socialise with the Scandinavian circle (prominent among whom were the writer Jonas Lie and his wife Thomasine), seek out new material for her writing – and get away from her husband, with whom the conflicts continued. However, the trip was fraught with difficulties from the start – and prompted her one and only published travelogue, '*Rejseuheld*' ('Travel Accidents'), which appeared in *Politiken* on 9 December 1895. In it she recounts incidents from her journey by boat to Kiel and then by train via Altona, Bremen, and Cologne to Paris. The different nationalities she meets on the way behave in typical fashion; fat German ladies eat continually, whereas arrogant Frenchmen take up all the space and tread on everyone's toes. Misfortunes befall the traveller continually; Amalie Skram was

well-known for being absent-minded and forgetful, and the letter is a tragi-comedy of forgotten garments, lost keys, missed appointments, and untraceable addresses.

Amalie Skram did not enjoy her stay in Paris; intended as recuperation, it became a daily struggle. She was continually short of money in an expensive city, felt cheated by landlords, and was robbed at the Moulin Rouge; she had to write begging letters home for advances and loans. The invitations and theatre trips she had expected did not materialise, and the Lies, on whose hospitality she had reckoned, did not include her in their social group – they were tired of being plagued by visiting countrymen, she was told. Just about her only contact with other Scandinavians during the months she was there was with Arne and Hulda Garborg; the former had written supportive reviews of her books, and the latter, with whom she took French lessons, was to become a faithful friend in her last years. She changed addresses frequently, searching for lodgings which were cheap, warm, and clean – and was continually disappointed; the changes of address also meant that letters and money orders went astray. Once she thought she had found an ideal room to rent, together with a couple of friendly Norwegian girls – but then had to move out again in a hurry when they received letters from home instructing them not to remain under the same roof as *such* an author.

Her stay in Paris can be followed through her letters, especially those she wrote home to Erik, from various different addresses and recounting the vicissitudes of her daily struggles. But as was the case with her letters home from the Finnish trip, far more space is devoted to analysing her feelings about him and their life together back in Denmark than to descriptions of Paris and her activities there. They can hardly be called travel letters. Erik complains that she says so little about where she is living and what she is doing, he has had to get out an old map

to try to find the street and imagine her surroundings. Why can she not tell him more about her experiences there, about what Paris means for her? It has not meant anything, she replies:

Hvad Paris har været for mig? Paris har været Dig og småen og sorgen. Nu først, efter at dine dejlige breve har skabt lys omkring mig, begynder Paris at bli Paris. Og nu må jeg rejse. Det er vanvittigt at bli her længere. [...] Jeg har brugt så forfærdelig mange penge, ikke fordi jeg har brugt dem, men fordi jeg er blet snydt og bedraget og bestjålet. Franskmændene er verdens griskeste folk. Det er jeg vis på.²²

What Paris has been for me? Paris has been *you* and Baby and sorrow. Only now, after your lovely letters have created light around me, does Paris begin to be Paris. And now I must leave. It's crazy to stay any longer. [...] I have used a dreadful lot of money, not because I have used it, but because I have been deceived and cheated and robbed. The French are the world's most avaricious people. *I am certain of it.*²³

A few days later Amalie travelled by train to Le Havre – visiting Erik's brother Tyge on the way – and boarded ship for the long voyage to Copenhagen. Her unsuccessful bid to find creative stimulus in Paris, as others of her countrymen had done, was over.

Whenever possible, as in this instance, Amalie Skram would avoid travelling by train and go by sea instead. Her dislike of trains amounted to 'togskek' ('train phobia'), which was confirmed when in July 1897 there was a train crash in Gentofte in which thirty-six people were killed; she should have been

22. Letter dated 20 January 1896. Garton 2002, III: 405.

23. Garton 2003, 408–409.

on that train, she told Erik, had she not been so absorbed in her writing that she missed a dinner to which she had been invited.²⁴ She was always far more sanguine about danger at sea, perhaps because she knew what she was facing. Sea travel had been a formative part of her life, as it became an integral part of her fiction.

Bibliography

- Garton, Janet (ed.). 2002. *Elskede Amalie. Brevvekslingen mellom Amalie og Erik Skram 1882–1899*. I–III. Oslo: Gyldendal.
- . (ed. and trans.). 2003. *Caught in the Enchanter's Net. Amalie and Erik Skram's Letters*. Norwich: Norvik Press.
- . (ed.). 2010. *Amalie Skram. Brevveksling med forlæggere*. Copenhagen: Det Danske Sprog- og Litteraturselskab.
- . 2011. *Amalie. Et forfatterliv*. Oslo: Gyldendal.
- Kielland, Eugenia (ed.) 1976. *Amalie Skram. Mellom slagene*. Oslo: Aschehoug.
- Køltzow, Liv. 1992. *Den unge Amalie Skram. Et portrett fra det 19. århundre*. Oslo: Gyldendal.
- Müller, Ludvig. 1917. 'Amalie Skram som sjømand'. *Tidens Tegn* 143, 27/5.
- Skram, Amalie. 1901. *Landsforrædere*. Copenhagen: Gyldendalske Boghandels Forlag.
- . 1911–12. *Samlede Værker. Mindeudgave*. I–III. Kristiania: Gyldendalske Boghandel, Nordisk Forlag.
- . 2014. *Fru Inés*. Katherine Hanson and Judith Messick (trans.). London: Norvik Press.
- . 2018. *Betrayed*. Katherine Hanson and Judith Messick (trans.). London: Norvik Press.
- . 2021. *Forraadt*. Janet Garton (ed.). Danske klassikere. Copenhagen: Det Danske Sprog- og Litteraturselskab/Gyldendal.

24. Letter dated 12 July 1897. Garton 2002, III: 473.