Hans Kirk

The Day Laborers

and

The New Times

Translated and

with an Introduction and Notes by

Marc Linder

Fänpihuà Press
Iowa City
2001
Copyright © Hans Kirk & Gyldendalske Boghandel, Nordisk Forlag A/S, Denmark, 1936 and 1939
Translation, Introduction, and Notes Copyright © 2001 by Marc Linder
All rights reserved
Printed in the United States of America


Cover illustration of “Dania” Cement Factory in Assens courtesy of Aalborg-Portland A/S.

Map of Assens courtesy of Kort and Matrikelstyrelsen.

Suggested Library of Congress Cataloging
Kirk, Hans, 1898-1962
The Day Laborers and The New Times/ by Hans Kirk. Translated and with an Introduction and Notes by Marc Linder
xlvii, 554 p.; maps; 21 cm.
Includes bibliographical references
ISBN 0-9673899-6-8
PT8175K53 D31 3 2001
Library of Congress Control Number 01-131420

Publication of this book was made possible in part by grants from the University of Iowa College of Law and the Office of the Vice President for Research of the University of Iowa.
Introduction

In the years following publication of The Fishermen in 1928, Hans Kirk returned to several of the themes he had developed in that book, which a half-century later would become the bestselling Danish novel of all time.¹ The impact of the pietistic Inner Mission on the political and social consciousness of the rural poor of Jutland continued to occupy Kirk.² But in the 1930s he turned his attention away from impoverished quasi-independent workers such as fishermen and toward a socio-economic and psychological micro-history of the rapid transformation of an impoverished, class-riven, semi-patriarchal agricultural community into an industrial society and of agricultural day laborers into an industrial proletariat organized in a national labor union.³

Kirk, whose Fishermen had created the Danish collective social novel, in which a group generates the dynamic and which dispenses with a central character or hero (but nevertheless describes individual characters in sympathetic detail), found this genre equally appropriate for The Day Laborers and The New Times.⁴ Though they are all collective novels, the later books ex-

¹Already by 1948 it was “a modern classic, read in schools and offered for examination.” Sven Møller Kristensen, “En af dem der ikke snublede i Starten,” Land og Folk, Jan. 11, 1948, at 13, col. 1 at 2.


³This point was stressed in a review of The Day Laborers by the chairman of the Danish Communist Party. Aksel Larsen, “Hans Kirk, Daglejerne,” Arbejderbladet, Dec. 4, 1936.

explore a historically dynamic socioeconomic development lacking in the seemingly static environment of *The Fishermen*. Similarly, *The Day Laborers* and *The New Times* do not mirror *The Fishermen*’s submersion of Marxist analysis of the relationship between the economic base and the psychological and religious superstructure below the surface. Ironically, as one of Kirk’s biographers noted, it was precisely this reserve that enabled thousands of Danish readers to take the book to heart and even to believe that the author was himself an Inner Mission fisherman. Unlike the group of fishermen, the day laborers are depicted in their interaction with other groups in a distinctly stratified class society, which is made more lucid as a totality.

Unlike the characters in *The Fishermen*, some in the later novels fail to perceive the personal integrity and dignity of the members of the Inner Mission, which is so rigorously conveyed in the earlier novel, and mercilessly mock them. Yet all three books testify to what the Icelandic novelist Halldor Laxness called Kirk’s “almost anthropological knowledge of the milieu he chose and the population groups he made himself spokesman for.”

The action in *The Day Laborers* and *The New Times* takes place, in the years shortly before and after World War I, along another fjord, Mariager (or Hobro) Fjord, which runs 26 miles inland to Hobro from the Kattegat on the east coast of Jutland and is situated about 25 miles south of the Limfjord, where *The
**Introduction**

*Fishermen* takes place. The chalk and clay pits in the area along Denmark’s longest fjord provided the raw materials for cement production. The fictional Alslev—an orthographic conflation of the small towns of Assens and Falslev, but in reality the former, which was the site of three cement factories—was but a few miles across the fjord from Kirk’s own birthplace in Hadsund. Assens, whose population amounted to 1,287 in 1901 and 1,402 in 1921, was listed in the Danish census as “Assens Factory Town” or “Assens Cement Town” in various years. It is about equidistant (thirty five miles) between Denmark’s then second largest city, Aarhus, to the south, and fourth largest city, Aalborg, to the north, which was the country’s other cement manufacturing center.

To simplify and dramatize the transformation of an agrarian into an industrial society, Kirk compressed the actual historical development of cement manufacturing in Assens. To be sure,

---

8One of the rare English-language works to discuss Kirk’s novels erroneously places the action in the Limfjord region. Scott de Francesco, *Scandinavian Cultural Radicalism: Literary Commitment and the Collective Novel* 126 (New York: Lang, 1990). The overwhelming number of gross factual errors in this author’s brief discussion of *The Fishermen*, *The Day Laborers*, and *The New Times* raises the suspicion of his inability to read Danish. Id. at 61-72.


10Several towns in Denmark are named Alslev, but not in this part of Jutland.

11Danmarks Statistik, *Statistisk aarbog: 17de aargang 1912*, tab. 7 at 10 (Copenhagen: Thieles Bogtrykkeri, 1912); Danmarks Statistik, *Statistisk aarbog 1921*, tab. 6 at 8 (Copenhagen: Thieles Bogtrykkeri, 1921).

12Nevertheless, even in the relatively large industrial city of Aalborg, construction of Denmark’s largest cement factory in 1889-91 left the local population at a loss to understand the great upheaval that awaited them at a time
Introduction

the cement factory which in The Day Laborers appears to be built around 1907-1908 (reckoning back from the placement of World War I in The New Times), corresponds to the actual building of the Kongsdal cement plant in Assens in 1907-1909. Support for establishing the plant came chiefly from larger groups of cement users, cement product manufacturers, and a group of master builders from Copenhagen, who lent the requisite share capital in exchange for the plant’s obligation to supply them with a large quantity of cement at below the market price. However, just as Kongsdal began operating in 1909, a price war pressed down prices, putting the plant’s original purpose out of reach and forcing the user-lenders to convert the plant into a normal corporation. Kirk’s account ignored the fact that by that time cement had been manufactured at Assens for more than thirty years, the Cimbria and Dania factories having been built there in 1873 and 1887, respectively. At the turn of the century these two plants, which were already exporting to Europe, Asia, and America, employed 150 and 350 workers, respectively. By

when many were not even acquainted with cement. Jesper Nielsen, Cementarbejdernes Fagforening at 93.

To be sure, these factories were small and it was not until the Aalborg Portland-Cement-Factory began operating in 1891 and especially after it introduced rotary kilns at the end of the century that the industry began to develop in earnest in Denmark. Within a few years, Aalborg Portland-Cement-Factory virtually monopolized the industry by mergers with the other companies. Knudâge Riisager, F. L. Smidth & Co.: 1882-1922, at 53-64, 123-40 (Copenhagen: Langkjaers Bogtrykkeri, 1921).

shifting the focus to the early years of the twentieth century, Kirk was able to use the by then strong national labor unions—thanks in part to the organization of unskilled workers, Denmark arguably had the world’s highest unionization rate prior to World War I—as an outside force to promote and accelerate the formation of working-class consciousness in a backward and closed agrarian region.\(^{15}\)

In fact, the Assens cement factories were at the time the largest factories of any kind in Denmark not in the vicinity of a large city. Indeed, the cement industry, which became highly trustified in Denmark,\(^{16}\) was the first branch of large-scale production in which Danish capital achieved parity on the world market. Thus although Kirk’s depiction of the new factory proletariat as consisting of impoverished rural workers was historically accurate and representative,\(^{17}\) the placement of the factory

---

Samsøe, *Die Industrialisierung Dänemarks* 119 (Jena: Gustav Fischer, 1928); *Betænkning vedrørende Cementbranchens konkurrenceforhold* tab. 2 at 12.


\(^{17}\)According to Galenson, *The Danish System of Labor Relations* at 13: “The industrial recruits came not from an independent yeomanry . . . but rather from among the cottars and agricultural laborers who constituted 70 percent of the agricultural labor force in 1870. [T]he young men and women who entered the factories were not farm-owners fallen upon hard times . . . but rather a dependent group inured to exceedingly unfavorable economic circumstances. . . . They were conditioned, if not to the rigorous discipline of the factory, at least to severe restrictions upon freedom in allocating their time.” Workers at Denmark’s largest cement plant, Aalborg Portland-Cement-Factory, which was opened in 1889, were “recruited from the lowest social strata. Many came di-
Introduction

itself in a rural area was historically accurate, but atypical. In 1906, there were five cement factories in Denmark, each employing more than 100 and in the aggregate 1,165 industrial workers; by the first year of World War I, eight cement factories employed a total of 1,905 workers.

Kirk himself was an observant child of ten or so at the time of the outset of the events depicted in the novels and his memoirs, published more than a decade after the novels, include many vignettes ‘prefiguring’ events, groups, and persons in the novels. Accompanying his father, a country doctor, on his house calls in the Mariager Fjord area, Kirk met “the disease called hunger.” Already then it began to dawn on him dimly that “one has to choose between the manor and the cottages.” But by and by he also learned that “the real poverty is mute, it accepts its fate apathetically. So long as people can fight and protest, they’re not poor, they still retain a sense of human worth.”

Even as a child he was acquainted with small farmers who, like directly from the large manorial farms in the hinterlands, many came from abroad, and most of them were quite young and tough workers, who liked both a drink and a good fight. They were often more preoccupied with making a living hand to mouth than with organizing themselves and fighting for better wages and working conditions.” Nielsen, Cementarbejdernes Fagforening at 17.

Claus Engelund, Ronald Germskov, and Lis Tanghøj, “Arbejde og dagligt brød: Om Hans Kirks Daglejeme og De ny Tider,” Litteratur og Samfund, No. 28-29, at 12 (1979) (and editorial comment on inside front cover). Correlative, Kirk was not addressing the question of the many immiserated agricultural smallholders who were not absorbed by burgeoning factories. Id. at 19.

Danmarks Statistik, Statistisk aarbog: 17de aargang 1912, tab. 53 at 60-61; Danmarks Statistik, Statistisk aarbog 1921, tab. 50 at 58-59.

Hans Kirk, Skyggespil 79, 77, 78 (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1998 [1953]). Denmark’s pioneering proletarian novelist, Martin Andersen Nexø, had a socialist express a similar thought in one of his epic novels: “As long as you can keep the bile flowing, you haven’t completely gone to the dogs.” Martin Andersen Nexø, Ditte Menneskebarn 2:268 (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1995 [1921]).
Cilius Andersen, one of the novels’ key characters, had “boozed away” their farms.21

In February 1930, barely a year after having published *The Fishermen*, Kirk was already “grinding away at a book that will deal with the Danish agricultural worker (or more precisely the Jutlandish).” Writing from Hadsund, he explained to his correspondent, Hartvig Frisch (one of the Social Democratic party’s leading members of parliament and cultural affairs spokespersons), that “I would like to depict the old, ingenuous day laborer, the type one can meet over here, and his son, the politically awake and class-conscious union man, such as we of course fortunately also have them. Whether it will succeed is very doubtful.”22 A year later he told Frisch that he had resumed work on his agricultural laborer novel despite the “hopeless” situation, which, if a writer described it as he saw it, could easily serve as “reactionary propaganda against Social Democracy and the labor union movement.”23 Evidence of Kirk’s focus on agricultural workers at this time is a story he published in 1931 about Marinus Jensen—who would become one of the central characters in *The Day Laborers*—which was incorporated in the novel in large part verbatim five years later.24

But by April 1933 Kirk had definitively abandoned his novel on the rural proletariat: it had become so gloomy and pessimistic that he could not bear working on it.25 The reasons for Kirk’s

---

25 Thierry, *Hans Kirk* at 51. For an even more pessimistic contemporaneous assessment by Denmark’s then best-known novelist, see Martin Andersen Nexo, *For lud og koldt vand* 29-33 (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1969 [1937]).
pessimism were not far to seek. While writing *The Fishermen*, he had published an article in a radical journal in 1927 titled, “The Rural Proletariat,” in which he criticized the Social Democratic Party for supporting a state-financed policy of partitioning farmland to expand the class of very small holdings. Contrary to the Social Democrats’ goal of forming a socialist vanguard out of the new small farmers, the result of the so-called state smallholders act of 1899\(^\text{26}\) and its renewals in 1904, 1909, and 1914, and especially of the Land Acts of 1919\(^\text{27}\) was the creation of a solid defense against the propertyless rural proletariat. Kirk took the Social Democrats to task for having failed to recognize that in an agricultural country it was first and foremost necessary to organize the rural workers in a broad front against the land owners; instead, by opening the door to the middle class, the Social Democrats had deprived the rural proletariat of its best forces: “The partitioning is society’s safety valve. But it is hardly a so-

---

\(^{26}\)Lov om Tilvejebringelse af Jordlodder for Landarbejdere, No. 39 af 24de Marts 1899, in *Lovtidende for Kongeriget Danmark for Aaret 1899*, at 63-69 (Copenhagen: Schultz, n.d.) provided for state loans to farm workers to acquire small plots.

\(^{27}\)On the laws and their implementation, see F. Skrubbeltrang, *Agricultural Development and Rural Reform in Denmark* 259-82 (Rome: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 1953). Although the ostensible purpose of the 1899 law was to provide land to farm workers, owners of the largest farms supported it as a means of retaining labor that had been migrating to cities and overseas (especially to the United States) in search of higher wages. The smallholdings were designed to be large enough to induce the better workers to remain on the land, but small enough so that a family could not support itself and would be “forced” to seek employment on others’ farms. Large employing farmers preferred this solution because it was cheaper than increasing wages. By the same token, farm workers were willing to accept a lower wage in exchange for their own house and land. Following the so-called system-change in 1901, under which the king appointed a cabinet government reflecting the majority in the lower house of parliament, this second dimension of the laws receded. Erling Olsen, *Danmarks økonomiske historie siden 1750*, at 64-65 (Copenhagen: Gad, 1962).
Introduction

Kirk argued that the party should have been pushing for large-scale industrialization and socialization of agriculture. The failure to achieve that goal within a reasonable time would, in Kirk's view, mean that working-class politicians' next and final social task would be a "common burial club for the Danish proletariat." He was not, however, blind to the enormous impediments to propagandizing rural workers: "After all, the parish is a small society where everyone is well-known and where the class contradictions do not stand out sharply. A farmer is on familiar terms with his farmhand and eats together with his day laborers—all the little things that have their importance." In many places it was even dangerous to be a union member: "The farmers loathe workers' organizations the way a cat loathes mustard. It's not only a fanaticized feeling, but something of a vital instinct. The farmers have by means of their unique political talent, their horse-trading cunning, a kind of sense of what threatens them. There are thousands of farmers who won't use unionized labor power, and the rural workers' organizations are rather powerless vis-à-vis them." The educational process was further impeded by the farmers' domination of the entire pedagogical system. Kirk's pessimistic conclusion in 1927 culminated in the claim that the smartest thing a farmhand could do was to emigrate to America.

Kirk's seemingly slow progress on the novels was in part a function of his need to support his family and his serious writing.

28Hans Kirk, "Landproletariatet," Clarté, No. 6., at 105-11 at 106 (June 1927).
29Kirk, "Landproletariatet" at 111.
30Kirk, "Landproletariatet" at 108.
31Kirk, "Landproletariatet" at 109. Martin Andersen Nexø, who had worked as a farm servant in his youth, reported in his memoirs that common folk agreed that farmers were "the hardest of employers." Martin Andersen Nexø, Vejs ende 17 (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1969 [1939]).
32Kirk, "Landproletariatet" at 110.
Over the years he wrote, under dozens of pseudonyms, as many as 900 short stories and novellas for Danish weeklies. In the 1930s, when he offered his journalistic services gratis to the Communist Party *Arbejderbladet*, its editor asked him how he expected to make ends meet, and Kirk replied: ‘‘With help of a couple of bottles of red wine to soften up my brain, in one night I can write two or three short stories for the better part of the sensationalist press—and then most of the month is taken care of economically . . . .’’

In June 1936, a few months before *The Day Laborers* appeared, Kirk again recounted the origins and progress of the novels to Hartvig Frisch:

A few years ago I wrote a book that dealt directly with the current problems of the working class. But when I was three-fourths finished with it, the questions grew and I realized that I had to go deeper if it was not going to become merely a current propaganda novel. I got cracking again. Now I believe I got it right.

I’m just about finished with the first and have written a part of the third volume of a novel-trilogy. It depicts the little cement town Assens on Mariager Fjord, begins with the poor rural proletariat, with the founding of the cement factory, the growth of Social Democracy, the day laborers’ development from workers in the old-fashioned sense to industrial workers. You understand: the whole optimistic period in the working class’s history in Denmark. Volume 2 will depict the War and volume 3 the rationalization [sic] brought up to date. I think the topic can be rounded out nicely.

The manuscript for the second volume of the trilogy, which was initially titled *The New Life*, was delayed because, as Kirk told his publisher on October 20, 1938, it lacked the “atmosphere

---

34Letter from Hans Kirk to Frisch, June 10, 1936, in Arbejderbevægelsens Bibliotek og Arkiv.
of optimism” that the trilogy’s structure required and he had therefore been compelled to rewrite it.\textsuperscript{35}

Although Kirk predicted in 1936 that the third volume of the trilogy would appear the following year,\textsuperscript{36} he never completed it. One reason for the delay may have been Kirk’s conscientiousness in getting the background facts right. For example, when Otto Gelsted, a noted Danish poet, visited Kirk at his home in mid-1937, he noticed piles of scientific works in Danish and German with learned and forbidding titles like “Textbook on Chemical Technology,” and asked Kirk whether he was preparing to take a degree in engineering. Kirk replied that in writing the sequel to \textit{The Day Laborers} he had to familiarize himself with the details of the cement factory: “In ‘The Day Laborers’ I happened to confuse a tube mill with a rotary kiln, and I’d hate for that scandal to be repeated.”\textsuperscript{37}

The manuscript of the final volume which Kirk worked on between 1941 and 1943, while imprisoned by the Danish government at the demand of the German occupying powers,\textsuperscript{38} was never


\textsuperscript{36}Letter from Hans Kirk to Frisch, June 10, 1936.


\textsuperscript{38}On June 22, 1941, the day Hitler launched his invasion of the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany demanded that the Danish government arrest leading Danish Communists. Some of the 295 arrested were later released, leaving 116 in detention, including Kirk (and the novelists Martin Andersen Nexo and Hans Scherfig). He was also among the 90 who escaped from Horserød internment camp north of Copenhagen during the night of August 29, 1943, when Germany dissolved the Danish police and military and took over the camp. A further 157 Communists who failed to escape were shipped to the Nazi concentration camp at Stutthof, where some were killed. Erich Thomsen, \textit{Deutsche Besatzungspolitik in Dänemark 1940-1945}, at 79-82 (Düsseldorf: Bertelsmann
er recovered, despite Kirk’s demand just weeks after the end of the war that the Danish government locate it.\textsuperscript{39} Apparently the Germans had destroyed it.\textsuperscript{40} He resumed work on the trilogy after the war,\textsuperscript{41} telling a reporter as late as September 1948 that he hoped it would appear the following fall:

In this final volume I describe the period in which the dream of industrialism’s blessings bursts. Rationalization brings about a complete catastrophe for the little society that’s narrated in the book. The number of workers in the cement factory in the little town sinks from 1500 to 300, and since most of them have bought a house, it means they’re completely stuck in squalor. . . . If anything I would call it a social-critical novel, and the moral is that people themselves have to intervene in their lives and not let themselves be guided by the play of anonymous forces.\textsuperscript{42}

The close geographic proximity of the settings of the novels


\textsuperscript{40}A similar fate befell another manuscript, which Kirk managed to reconstruct after the war. See Marc Linder, “Introduction,” in Hans Kirk, \textit{The Slave} v-viii (Marc Linder tr.; Iowa City: Fânpihuà, 2000). Without identifying which manuscript was which, one of Kirk’s biographers stated that whereas one of the manuscripts was wrapped up and buried at the detention camp at which Kirk was held, but was gone when Kirk came looking for it after the war, the other manuscript was found by a Danish policeman among the papers Kirk had left behind in the wake of his escape on August 29, 1943; however, under the influence of the uncertain and unpredictable situation, the policeman thought it safest to destroy the manuscript immediately. Thierry, \textit{Hans Kirk} at 81. In between working on the manuscript for \textit{The Slave} in prison Kirk, who was well-known for retaining his equilibrium, helped comfort other prisoners. Nielsen, “Han fandt tilbage til sit land” at 4, col. 1.

\textsuperscript{41}In April 1947 he told his publisher that he was working industriously on the third volume. Thing, \textit{Hans Kirks mange ansigter} at 283.

\textsuperscript{42}Eric [Danielsen], “Mennesket må selv gribe ind i sin tilværelse,” \textit{Land og Folk}, Sept. 26, 1948, at 9, col. 1 at 2-3.
and the focus on a stratum of the rural poor during the first decades of the twentieth century might easily prompt readers to view *The Day Laborers* as a kind of sequel to *The Fishermen*. One reviewer went so far as to assert that they were so "homogeneous" they "could easily be bound together without cracking the spine." The reviewer believed that the books were cut from the same cloth because Kirk’s “Marxist historical writing”—which had all of life’s questions determined alone by economic conditions—was perfectly applicable to such exceptional circumstances as those experienced by poor fishermen and day laborers for whom hunger was a daily phenomenon. However, regardless of whether such reductionism in fact guides *The Day Laborers*, it is clearly alien to *The Fishermen*, which for that very reason irritated some leftist Danish literary critics in the 1970s.

While *The Day Laborers* and *The New Times* are clearly novels about industrialization, surprisingly—given Kirk’s membership in the Danish Communist Party and orthodox Marxism—they do not belong to the Dickensian genre attacking the horrors of proletarianization. Kirk does not portray the formerly intermittently employed East Jutland agricultural day laborers as being exposed to or perceiving heightened exploitation at the cement factory; on the contrary, their much higher and steady wages and year-round industrial employment and their escape from the petty tyranny of large farmers mark them as “people on the way up... in world history.”

---


45Thierry, Hans Kirk at 52. Although Kirk characterizes the sporadically employed agricultural day laborers’ employers as large farmers (*proprietærer*), in Jutland in 1915 only 21.5 percent of agricultural day laborers were temporary, while 78.5 percent were permanently employed all year round. This divi-
Introduction

Regardless of whether Kirk’s approach was influenced by the then dominant Soviet literary doctrine of socialist realism and the Soviet view that industrialization was per se progressive—the genre was typified by Fedor Gladkov’s 1925 novel *Cement*, centered on the post-revolutionary reconstruction of a cement factory, in which cement is “the symbol of the unbending will of the party of communists, which cements, binds the forces of the revolutionary people to victory and creative labor”—Kirk consciously chose to infuse the transformation with a spirit of profound optimism and not to write a Jutland version of Upton Sinclair’s *Jungle*.

Kirk’s decision to provide a relatively atypical account of capitalist industrialization of a rural region, thus ignoring a trajectory of immiseration faced by unemployed farmworkers who migrated to the cities, enabled him to conjure up the optimism that was to be undermined in the third volume by presenting a short-circuited model of the formation of working-class consciousness. (To be sure, Kirk did not leave readers unprepared: the cement factory president’s oaths in the final chapter of *The New Times* about profitability, losses, falling prices, and the need for change foreshadowed the events of the third volume.) It was also designed to give voice to his view that workers’ struggle for their “daily bread” could in itself be heroic, especially as part of a struggle for social liberation in a small parish society. The

sion was even more marked when cross-tabulated with farm size: nationally, 92.4 percent of day laborers on larger farms were permanent compared to 54.6 percent on smaller farms. Danmarks Statistik, *Tyende- og daglejerlønnen i landbruget 1915*, at 25 (Copenhagen: Bianco Lunos Bogtrykkeri, 1915). In addition, at least as of 1920, there were no large farms *(herregårde)* in the vicinity of Assens. See *Danmark land og folk: Historisk-topografisk-statistisk haandbog*, 3:715-28 and fold-out map of Randers Amt (Daniel Bruun ed.; Copenhagen: Gyldendalske Boghandel, 1920).


47Thing, *Hans Kirks mange ansigter* at 183, 186.
Introduction

budding industry of Marxist literary criticism in Denmark of the 1970s could not forgive Kirk his failure to embed the specific capitalist alienation of labor in the novels.48 Nevertheless, Kirk’s descriptions were realistic enough that a 1982 history of unskilled factory workers in Denmark devoted half of its two pages on cement plants to excerpts from *The New Times*.49 Much of this realism sprang from Kirk’s personal knowledge, gathered during his childhood on Mariager Fjord, of the pernicious impact of the dust spewed out by the cement factories on the health of workers, residents, and the environment. As a child Kirk had sensed “the strange dry smell of the cement dust, which settles like a fine white layer over trees and meadows near the cement town,” and observed the workers bicycling home from the cement factories “gray with cement dust.”50 The young Kirk had also known that the “hard work in the chalk pit easily knocks out ... a man, the fine chalk dust attacks the lungs. . . .”51 He then wove this childhood knowledge into the narrative. Thus on the very first page of *The New Times*, which introduces the cement factory operating at full tilt, he writes:

Everything was gray with cement dust. It drifted invisibly down like

48E.g., Henrik Damsgaard, *Hans Kirks 30-er-romaner. “Daglejerne” og “De ny tider”: Et brudstykke af industriarbejdernes opkomshistorie* (Kongerslev: GMT, 1975). Engelund, Gernskov, and Tanghøj, “Arbejde og dagligt brød” at 105, 109, while asserting that they did not fault Kirk for not having used Marx’s *Das Kapital* as a template, nevertheless criticized him for failing to explain where the capital of the capitalist who builds the cement factory came from, thus making the capitalist mode of production its own cause and concealing the fact that workers produce a product that is then turned against them as capital. In fact, however, insertion of information about how Høpner became rich in the United States before returning to Denmark would have been merely cosmetic or pedantic and added nothing to the novel.

49Jørgen Burchardt, *Fabrik 72-73* (Arbejdsmandens historie i 100 år, No. 1; København: Fremad, 1982).

50Kirk, *Skyggespil* at 79, 152.

51Kirk, *Skyggespil* at 99.
ashes from a distant volcanic eruption. It settled over fields and roads, trees and roofs of houses. Even the coats of the red cows grazing on the fields in the vicinity turned gray. You got it in your throat, in your lungs, and it was doubtless the dust that was responsible for the fact that Black Anders’ daughter Matilde... began coughing and spitting blood and had to go to the sanatorium for tuberculosis.52

Nevertheless, this critical workplace and environmental-health narrative pales by comparison with accounts contemporaneous with the events in the novel. At the turn of the century, Carl Christian Clausen published a physical and social geography based on his travels throughout Jutland. In describing Assens and the Cimbria and Dania factories with their more than 500 workers, he called “this wealth-producing chalk-town” “disgusting”:

Even the worst coal dust seems tolerable compared to this gray dust, which can lie like a hazy fog over everything, stops up the nose and mouth, penetrates into the lungs, and makes breathing unpleasant and painful. To a visitor who comes with the steamer out from the fresh fjord, the work in these factories appears the most appalling of all factory work in Denmark. But man is a patient animal who can get used to much, even to breathing this cement-filled air day after day. Nevertheless, when one is once again on board the steamer, when one brushes the dust from one’s coat with one’s hand and from one’s lungs with a few deep breaths, one is grateful to one’s mother because she did not give birth to one to be a day laborer in the cement factories on this beautiful fjord.53

---

52P. 269 below. In two further passages in The New Times Kirk also confronted the subject. In the first he calls cement dust “a curse for people” (p. 376 below). In the other he observes that “it wasn’t good to get cement dust down in your lungs. Marinus coughed when he came home, but he didn’t take it seriously. ‘I’m too old to get tuberculosis,’ he said. ‘It cares only for young blood. I’m not running any risk’” (p. 481 below).

53C. C. Clausen and J. J. Nielsen, Danmarks land col. 225 (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, n.d. [1903?]) (the part on Jutland is separately paginated).
Introduction

Marie Nielsen, a left-wing socialist who visited the novel’s cement factory in 1915, was prompted by the noise, dust, and 12-hour shifts to characterize it as a “hell,” a “prison,” as “wage slavery in pure form without any mitigating circumstances.”

Kirk’s optimism-generating strategy was all the more remarkable in light of the fact that, according to Denmark’s quasi-monopoly cement producer, the technology existed (and in places had been adopted) at the time to enable cement factories to operate under conditions “as cleanly and hygienic as in almost every other manufacturing” industry.

In 1937, in the interim between the appearance of The Day Laborers and The New Times, Kirk was asked by (a smiling) Nordahl Grieg, the anti-fascist Norwegian poet and writer, whether it was “your intention to scour the whole country . . . so you can by and by describe one worker milieu after the other.” Kirk, who characterized his novelistic intention as “calling attention to the convulsions in social life and showing the economic social context,” revealingly replied:

No, God forbid! That would be much too boring. The reason I chose the fishermen and these day laborers is that within these population strata transformations have taken place that quite especially clearly show how the changed living conditions change people’s attitude and views. For me that’s what’s interesting.


55 Riisager, F. L. Smidth & Co. at 152-55 (quote at 155). Smidth was (and remains) the leading producer of cement industry machinery and co-owner of the major cement manufacturing factories in Denmark. By 1939, it had built more than half of the world’s cement factories and its factory in Aalborg, equipped with the most advanced technology, served as advertising. Id. at 50; Henning Bender, Aalborgs industrielle udvikling fra 1735 til 1940, at 374 (Aalborg: Aalborg Kommune, 1987).

56 Gelsted, “Besøg hos Hans Kirk.” Nevertheless, a conservative cultural
Introduction

Considerable debate has surrounded the question of Kirk’s failure to finish the final volume of the trilogy. In 1948, when Kirk was able to interrupt his intense journalistic activity on behalf of the Danish Communist Party for several months to reconstruct the two novels lost during the war, he chose to finish *The Slave* despite the fact that his readers were first and foremost expecting the third volume of the trilogy. One possible reason not discussed in the literature is that by 1948 Kirk was on the verge of believing that writing realistic novels about the development of the Danish working class was something of a “grind.”

In seeking an explanation, Werner Thierry, one of Kirk’s biographers, speculated that by the years 1948-1953, when Kirk was writing his last novels and exhausting his creative capacity for epic works, the Communist Party’s Stalinist literary party line would have pushed him into the socialist idealism then flourishing in the Soviet Union, “an art form he surely felt that his pen couldn’t touch.”

His chief biographer, Morten Thing, “cautiously” speculates that Kirk abandoned the work because supervening political-economic development no longer made carrying out the original plan possible. That plan was conceived during the crisis of the 1930s and included bringing the story, which had ended in *The Slave*...
Introduction

New Times shortly after the end of World War I, up to date. (Indeed, in 1934, as Kirk was composing the trilogy, production at the Kongsdal factory itself was shut down because it had become unprofitable; Cimbria had closed in 1919.) During the 1930s the trilogy would have climaxed in a rationalization crisis that could have demonstrated to workers that replacing capitalism with socialism was a realistic solution to the problems of daily existence. Such a perspective would have been plausible at the time—after all, the unemployment rate among union workers reached an extraordinary 43.5 percent in January 1933 and the then even higher rate among unskilled union workers was still 25 percent even as late as 1940—and might have retained its plausibility during the Nazi occupation of World War II, but by the late 1940s a third volume that brought the story to a socialist closure during the 1930s would have been overtaken by postwar events and lost its power to persuade.

However, at least one critic has inverted this logic, arguing that the shutdown of the cement industry at Mariager Fjord in 1980 (when Dania was closed) belatedly confirmed Kirk’s “prophecy.” Indeed, critic and novelist Bjarne Nielsen Brovst went so far as to assert that as a result of Kirk’s novels, the closure transformed what might have been merely the passing of “a...
Introduction

piece of local history" into the end of "a piece of Danish industrial history and literary history. . . ." The drastic rationalization and reduction of employment in the cement industry that set in by the 1970s would surely not have surprised Kirk. By that time one of the world’s largest excavation machines totally replaced backbreaking human labor in the chalk pits, while almost fully automated factory processes, producing as much in three days as the biggest cement factory could produce in an entire year at the beginning of the twentieth century, were monitored and guided from computerized control rooms.

Yet another literary critic has suggested that Kirk’s abandonment of the projected third volume may have been a function of his own immersion in pre-industrial and early-industrial society and class relations, as a result of which he never published developed, realistic descriptions of the urban proletariat. A Kirk specialist, Ole Ravn, has speculated that Kirk’s failure to complete the trilogy was primarily a result of his increasingly strong feeling that his journalistic work for the Communist Party daily Land og Folk was politically more important. However, several other literary critics have concluded that Kirk intentionally scrapped the third volume after the war because it would have required a critique of the Danish Social Democratic party and of capitalism that would have been incompatible with the Communist Party’s postwar parliamentary strategy of cooperation with the Social Democrats.

Without any doubt Kirk died a member of Denmark’s Com-

---

64Nielsen, Cementarbejdernes Fagforening 1896-1996, at 150-51; Burchardt, Fabrik at 73.
66Ravn, “Autonomiens begrænsninger” at 140.
67Engelund, Gernskov, and Tanghøj, “Arbejde og dagligt brød” at 159-68.
munist Party in best standing. The day after his death on June 16, 1962, three-fourths of the front page of the Sunday edition of the party newspaper were taken up with his photo, his death-bed letter to “Dear Comrades,” and an obituary-encomium by the party’s central committee.68

In his review of The Day Laborers the day following its appearance in 1936, novelist Tom Kristensen was not alone in regarding Kirk as the greatest Danish novelist of the 1930s.69 Another reviewer called it “the most promising novel the youngest generation has yet achieved.”70 Three years later, on the occasion of reviewing The New Times, Kristensen pronounced both books classics the day they appeared.71

The Day Laborers and The New Times are, after The Fishermen, Kirk’s best-selling books, having gone through sixteen and ten editions, respectively. The Day Laborers was promptly translated into Dutch in 1938, followed over the next two decades by editions in Czech, Icelandic, Swedish, Russian, and even Esperanto. The New Times was also translated into Czech, Dutch, and Swedish.72 And preparations for a film adaptation of both novels have been underway for several years.73
A Note on the Text

The translation follows the text of the first edition and/or the last edition of both novels to appear during Kirk’s lifetime. In particular, the translation follows those editions of *The Day Laborers* in beginning each chapter on a new page. Though out of print and available only in a few U.S. libraries, the earlier editions are essential because the later paperback editions, despite having gone through many printings and being a favorite of Danish high school teachers, are riddled with dozens of typographical errors (including the omission of whole sentences) which may have crept in when the texts were reset to accommodate the Danish orthographic reform of 1948.1 The paperback editions, which are themselves out of print, were first published in 1965 (*The Day Laborers*) and 1968 (*The New Times*), several years after the death of Kirk, who therefore had no opportunity to proofread them.

Readers who are not familiar with the political, socioeconomic, and cultural history of Denmark that forms an integral part of the novels should consult the extensive notes at the end of the book designed to make this background accessible. The notes also document (and, where necessary, explicate) the large number of express and unidentified quotations from the Bible.

---

1In some instances, errors in the paperback edition of *The Day Laborers* had already been introduced into the text of the 1950 edition, the first to appear after the spelling reform. For example, the colon in “Jens Horse said:” (p. 52) became a period in the 1950 and paperback editions. Similarly, some (but not all) of the errors in the paperback edition of *The New Times* first appeared in a special edition three years before Kirk’s death; the only edition to number the chapters (1-26), its text seems to have been the basis of the paperback edition. Hans Kirk, *De ny tider* (Copenhagen: Borgen, 1959). On the lack of evidence that Kirk proofread these editions, see below note to p. 307 (p. 532).
Acknowledgments

*The Day Laborers* and *The New Times* present even greater linguistic difficulties than *The Fishermen* not only for translators, but even for Danes. In addition to liberally weaving Jutlandish dialect words and idioms into the dialog, Kirk also makes frequent use of antiquated vocabulary and syntax that deviate from standard modern Danish. No wonder that the *Ordbog over det danske Sprog*, the Danish counterpart to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, illustrates so many of its entries with sentences from these two novels. Indeed, several words and phrases turned out to be so obscure that seemingly no living Dane, including experts in the subject areas from which the terms are taken, could understand them.

A number of Danes made grappling with these challenges possible. First and foremost, Gitte Gaarsvig Sørensen (Special-pædagogisk forlag in Herning, Jutland), despite her gradual realization that she was dealing with a “perfectionist,” in an act of incredible generosity, altruism, and solidarity, (apparently) joyfully accommodated a perfect stranger’s perfectly preposterous request that she permit herself to be bombarded daily, for months on end, with untold numbers of email questions about the pickiest points of Danish language and culture. *A tykkes, a skylder dig tusind tak, bitte Gitte!*

Elias Bredsdorff, professor emeritus of Danish at Cambridge University and anti-Nazi resistance hero, provided extravagant encouragement for the whole cycle of Kirk translations. Kirk’s biographer Morten Thing (Roskilde University Centre) took time from his own work as a prolific author to draw on his encyclopaedic knowledge of modern Danish history and culture to track down and explain numerous obscure Danish institutions, expressions, and figures. Pastor Frederik V. Jensen, in addition to making many midnight suggestions for rendering tricky pas-
Acknowledgments


Poul Houe (University of Minnesota) offered great insight into the meaning of numerous unusual phrases and constructions. Søren Beltoft and Birgitte Brinkmann Thomasen (Dansk Sprognavn), Carl Erik Bay (Det Kongelige Bibliotek), Viggo Sørensen (Jysk Ordbog), Jens Brix Christiansen, Mogens Lemvig Hansen, Palle Jørgensen, and Else D’Angelo explained several obscure Danish words or constructions. Bent Ole Borup (Aalborg Portland A/S) explained cement factory terms. Jørgen Hunosøe identified the poem on page 43 of The Day Laborers as “The Visit in Heaven” by Sophus Claussen. Two attorneys, Jørgen U. Grønborg of Århus and Thomas Lemvig of Fredericia, explained various aspects of Danish law. Helli Skærbak (Roskilde University Centre Library) provided copies of otherwise inaccessible newspaper articles, while Hannah Lindén, Eva Nancke, and Gitte Lunde Johansen (Arbejderbevægelsens Bibliotek og Arkiv) made available unpublished letters from Kirk to Hartvig Frisch and copies of works unavailable in the United States.

Larry Zacharias (University of Massachusetts at Amherst) and poet Jan Weissmiller, more expert navigators than Odysseus himself, avoided losing errors to the Scylla of underediting without being sucked into Charybdis’s whirlpool of overediting. Nancy Jones (University of Iowa) made a number of suggestions for changes. And last but not least, Marjorie Rahe, whose Danish hot-line was always open when it was needed most, also re-worked the prayer on page 68 of The Day Laborers.

The photo of Kongsdal Cement Factory in Assens on page
Acknowledgments
