

A Report from Nordic Research Network 2015 in Edinburgh

Ian Giles

University of Edinburgh

The fourth edition of the Nordic Research Network conference series, organised by graduate students for graduate researchers and early-career scholars working on Nordic topics, took place at the University of Edinburgh on 18-19 February 2015. Established in 2010, the Nordic Research Network conference has now visited both UCL and Edinburgh twice. For further details of previous events, see *Scandinavica* 49:2 and Norvik Press's *Illuminating the North* volume published in 2014.

Planning for NRN2015 began in May 2014, when Ian Giles and Barbara Tesio, both PhD candidates in Scandinavian Studies, began to submit funding applications and draw up ideas for the next conference. Following receipt of a grant from the University of Edinburgh's Researcher-led Initiative Fund, three more Scandinavian Studies PhD colleagues, Laura Chapot, Chris Cooijmans and Ryan Foster, joined the organising committee. Further efforts secured additional funding from a number of generous sponsors, including Norvik Press. Alongside the organisation of the conference itself, the committee undertook to overhaul the NRN brand by means of a new website, Facebook page, Twitter handle and a fresh logo designed by graphic artist Giorgia Ghergo.

The conference call for papers elicited a high number of responses from across the UK (and a handful from elsewhere) that covered the length and breadth of what might be considered Nordic Studies. The organisers assembled a strong programme featuring fifty-two speakers divided across thirteen sessions. For the first time in NRN's history, this included a number of parallel sessions.

The conference took part within the University of Edinburgh's Innovative Learning Week, a week during the University's spring semester dedicated to non-traditional forms of learning. Therefore a number of additional events were scheduled. This included a warm-up lecture by keynote speaker Dr Mads Bunch on 17 February, as well as a suite of events relating to translation and Scandinavian children's literature held on 20-21 February at the University of Edinburgh, and the Danish Cultural Institute.

When the big day arrived, it was with some trepidation that the organising committee arrived in Project Room at 50 George Square, the new home of Scandinavian Studies in Edinburgh. A two-day conference, 120 registered delegates, over fifty speakers – not to mention eighteen different sponsors. Would it go off without a hitch? Of course! The organisers had provided custom tote bags filled with plenty of sweets and had laid on morning coffee and pastries during registration – how could it go wrong?

Edinburgh's Reader in Danish, Dr Bjarne Thorup Thomsen, opened proceedings before an initial plenary session on the theme of hybridity kicked off, with well-received papers on jazz, bilingualism, sculptures and the transmission of Danish literature to the UK. Panels followed on cultural production, the concept of space, narrative, approaches to the past, political voices, translation, conflict, linguistics, belief systems, gender, contact, and identity. The organisers had endeavoured to establish thematic panels that allowed speakers and audience alike to draw connections between work being carried out in different fields and disciplines with the aid of the Nordic element. With a little able guidance from some of the brightest Scandinavianists in Britain as session chairs, the result was highly successful. Many delegates commented that they were astonished not only at the quality of the papers, but also the direction taken by post-session discussions and the depth they went into. Naturally, sessions were regularly interspersed with opportunities to consume caffeine and cake, sushi and sandwiches, pastries and puddings, and much more. The view of the NRN founders and all subsequent organising committees has always been that the 'Network' element of the name is just as important as the Nordic –

and that networking between delegates is vital to the success of these conferences.

On the evening of 18 February, Mads Bunch from the University of Copenhagen delivered his keynote lecture on North Atlantic literature, encompassing the Faroe Islands, Iceland and Orkney, to great aplomb in front of an audience of more than one hundred. This was followed by a raucous reception featuring Dallahan, one of the hottest new talents on the Scottish folk music scene.

Possibly the most popular feature of the entire conference was the panel discussion entitled 'What happens next for Scandinavian and Nordic Studies in the UK?', held on 19 February. Under the able chairmanship of Dr Guy Puzey (Edinburgh), the late Professor Helena Forsås-Scott (UCL/Edinburgh), Dr Claire Thomson (UCL), Dr Alan Macniven (Edinburgh) and Dr Pietari Kääpä (Stirling) discussed their own perspectives and reflections on the subject at hand with substantial contributions from the audience. The consensus was that while the traditional field of Scandinavian Studies had changed in recent decades, teaching and research with a Nordic focus in the UK is in rude health. Not least, it was noted that the numbers in attendance at NRN2015 far outstripped the typical numbers experienced at the British Association of Scandinavian Studies conferences held from the 1970s until the 1990s. It was suggested by some older hands of Scandinavian Studies that the conference was possibly the biggest ever gathering of Nordic scholars in the UK.

The conference was rounded off with a particularly enjoyable dinner held at Swedish restaurant Hemma, providing delegates with one final chance to network, and to swap research tips and email addresses. It was also a valuable opportunity to contribute to the Scottish economy in the shape of whisky sales! A respectable twenty or so delegates were up bright and early the next morning to round off their NRN experience with a guided walking tour of Nordic Edinburgh, featuring visits to, among other things, the Edinburgh rune stone and the Norwegian war memorial.

As delegates left, many positive comments were made – some to the effect that NRN2015 was the best conference they had attended. Feedback provided by delegates in a subsequent online questionnaire

also demonstrated that not only had the vast majority enjoyed themselves, but they also placed a great deal of value on the academic experience and networking opportunities provided.

The organisers would not have been able to run the conference so successfully without assistance from countless individuals and the generosity of its sponsors – to all of whom they are indebted. To read more about the NRN2015 conference, please visit the Storify of the conference. The conference proceedings will be published by Norvik Press in 2016.

Useful Links

Storify of NRN2015: <https://storify.com/nrnconference/nrn2015>

Nordic Research Network website:

<http://www.nordicresearchnetwork.co.uk/>

NRN Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/nordicresearchnetwork>

NRN Twitter: <https://twitter.com/nrnconference>

Article about NRN2015 in *Shetland Times*, 6 March 2015:

<http://bit.ly/1LBJZWm>

Two blogs about NRN2015 by Bookwitch:

<https://bookwitch.wordpress.com/2015/02/19/bookwitch-goes-to-a-conference/>

<https://bookwitch.wordpress.com/2015/02/20/a-land-frightful-to-live-in/>

Blog by Nordic Academic Press about NRN2015:

<http://www.nordicacademicpress.com/nyheter/2015/03/re-mapping-lagerlof-och-nordic-academic-press-i-skottland/>