

**Book Review: *Scandinavia Refracted.*
*A Festschrift in Honour of Bjarne
Thorup Thomsen***

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IAN GILES (eds.): ***Scandinavia Refracted. A Festschrift in Honour of Bjarne Thorup Thomsen.***
Scottish Society for Northern Studies, Edinburgh
2022. Pp. 365. ISBN: 978-1-3999-3524-1.

Bjarne Thomsen joined the Department of Scandinavian Studies as Lecturer in Danish in 1987, the year it was established. After almost thirty-five years of teaching and research, he retired as a Reader in 2021. This volume celebrates his achievements and highlights his contribution to knowledge and his wide-ranging research interests. It is a mixture of anecdotes and tributes, which provide abundant evidence of his influence as teacher and mentor, and more scholarly articles on areas connected with his own research. Out of twenty-four longer and shorter pieces, twelve are peer-reviewed articles, covering subjects as varied as literary themes and trends, concepts of history, travel, exchanges across the North Sea, visual representations – quite a smørgåsbord, as the editor admits. Rather than brief notes on everything, this reviewer has decided to pick out a few articles in order to try to give a flavour of the whole (and here I must declare an interest, as the author of an article about Amalie Skram as a travel writer – which for obvious reasons I shall not discuss).

Bjarne's colleague at Edinburgh, Arne Kruse, has contributed an article about runic stones in three different Nordic countries, at Jelling (Denmark), Frösö (Sweden), and Kuli (Norway). These are coincidentally located in areas near to where Bjarne, his wife Gunilla and Arne himself come from; but they are also linked in that they are all related to the conversion from paganism to Christianity in the three countries – they are in fact the only contemporary Scandinavian written evidence for these acts of conversion. They are also the first Scandinavian sources for the names of the nations Denmark and Norway, and for Jämtland in Sweden. The article presents a fascinating account of the way the stones give artistic expression to the personal and social upheavals of their day.

Visual representations and travel are central to C. Claire Thomson's article about railway films in Denmark and Britain in the 1940s, demonstrating the crosscurrents of influence across the North Sea. The documentaries all capture the excitement of movement, and show the clear influence of the pioneering film *Night Mail* from 1936. Central to the presentation are two films from 1948 which foreground the working classes who manned and used the railways, the Scottish 'Waverley Steps', which captures the rhythms of working-class life, and

the Danish 'Her er Banerne' (Here are the Railways), which conveys 'a palpable sense of the lived spacetime of labour'. Both films, maintains the author, crystallized the dream of escape for their impoverished postwar audiences.

Barbara Tesio-Ryan picks up on another of Bjarne's research interests, Selma Lagerlöf, in her comparison of Lagerlöf's speech 'Hem och Stat' ('Home and State', 1911) with Karen Blixen's 'En Baaltale med 14 Aars Forsinkelse' ('Oration at a Bonfire', 1951). Both authors emphasize the importance of collaboration and cooperation between the sexes for a well-functioning society. Both also employ storytelling and humour as rhetorical devices to convey their opinions on gender. Composed in different periods of women's writing – Lagerlöf in what Elaine Showalter, in *A Literature of Their Own*, called the 'feminist' era, Blixen in the 'female' one – their speeches have accordingly different emphases. Lagerlöf points out that the Home has been created by women, with men as their continual support, and functions very well, whereas the State has been created by men alone, and as a result functions much less well – leading to class divisions, unemployment, emigration etc. Blixen, on the other hand, wants to reclaim women's essential difference from men; it is the basic grounding aspect of the feminine which is necessary for the evolution of society.

The focus is on Denmark and the Danish islands in Henk van der Liet's 'Rewriting the Homeland – Danish Islands: Real, Imagined, and Between the Lines'. He examines how Denmark's overseas colonies and its ca. 400 islands have helped to form the country's mentality, giving the nation from early days a seaborne identity. Islands have been, and still are, variously places of nostalgia, of utopia, of exile and imprisonment. With the shrinking of empire, the islands which are a part of Denmark itself have been highlighted in works such as *De danskes Øer* I-III (1926-28) as well as in literature, e.g. Martin A. Hansen's (fictional) Sandø and Klaus Rifbjerg's (real) Amager. Their history is still evolving from inhabited to depopulated to (most likely) repopulated, and Danish narratives about islands are also evolving, as evidenced by Sigurd Buch Kristensen's recent deconstructed version of *De danskes Øer* (2014).

This book was published alongside a companion volume in honour of Arne Kruse (see review posted here). Together the two handsome publications pay fitting tribute to central figures in one of the only two remaining Scandinavian departments in UK universities, and present strong evidence of the ongoing vitality of the subject.