

Introduction

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The wild geese were not flying very high because their new companion was not used to breathing in the thinnest air. And for his sake, they were also flying a little slower than usual.

Finally the boy forced himself to turn his eyes down to the earth beneath. What he saw looked like a huge cloth spread out below him, a cloth that was divided into an unbelievable number of large and small checks.

‘Where in heaven’s name am I?’ he wondered.

Selma Lagerlöf, *Nils Holgersson’s Wonderful Journey through Sweden*¹

This festschrift honours the highly esteemed Dr Bjarne Thorup Thomsen, who retired from his role as Reader in Danish at the University of Edinburgh in 2021, following almost three and a half decades of inspirational teaching, mentorship, and research.

Given his personal and professional disposition towards the literature of travel and movement, his own origins in

1. Lagerlöf 2013: 28.

udkantsdanmark, and his love of hillwalking, it might seem obvious to the casual bystander that Bjarne was always destined to end up in Scotland, but Edinburgh was no foregone conclusion.

Born in North Jutland in 1955 to Gerda and Hugo, rumour has it that, in his early years, Bjarne was quite the footballing talent and the decision to focus on his studies was much to the chagrin of his coach. Bjarne's wanderlust had already manifested itself in 1974 when he set out for Copenhagen to pursue his university studies rather than remaining in his native tract. After completing his cand.philol. in Scandinavian Literature at the University of Copenhagen, he was drawn back to Jutland and teacher training in Aalborg, where he was first student and later teacher. The limits of the Danish job market – and indeed, young Bjarne's yearning for adventure – saw him cast his net wider.

It is rare that a book of celebration such as this volume begins by identifying axe wielding by the University Grants Commission as a good thing, but in this particular case it does. The Department of Swedish at the University of Aberdeen came into being shortly after the Second World War, and by the early 1970s, it was a veritable hive of teaching and research activity spanning all manner of Swedish and Scandinavian interests.² Nonetheless, the Commission reached the decision in 1986 that there was a surfeit of small language departments and in its view there was only one possible solution: closure. In the case of Aberdeen's Scandinavian department, the 1986/87 academic year was its last.

At a meeting of the Scottish Society for Northern Studies (SSNS) late in 1986, Irene Scobbie met the University of Edinburgh's Professor Peter Brand, who offered the closing department an opportunity to rise from the ashes as Edinburgh's

2. Scobbie 1973: 13–15.

new Department of Scandinavian Studies. With its new lease of life, the department was able to appoint its first ever full-time lecturer in Danish.

In its 'wisdom', the Commission had also precipitated the closure of Newcastle's Scandinavian Studies department,³ where one Bjarne Thorup Thomsen had arrived in the autumn of 1986 to take up the post of Lecturer in Danish. This unhappy decision by the Commission was in fact the cause of the refraction that brought Bjarne to Edinburgh in 1987, to the rejuvenated department of Scandinavian Studies.

Bjarne flourished in Edinburgh. His teaching over more than thirty years has not only delivered hundreds of new Danish speakers, but also expanded horizons and given rise to new young researchers. While there are many highlights to focus on, various courses on Scandinavian children's literature convened by Bjarne are often fondly mentioned by former students, and this editor would note that Bjarne's course exploring the cinema of Ingmar Bergman made a lasting impression on him.

As a mentor and supervisor, calm composure has characterised his approach to some fifteen doctoral candidates, many more master's students, and countless undergraduate dissertation writers under his charge. He has always offered a little balm to the soul, plenty of wisdom, and a dash of humour in his meticulous-yet-dense handwriting and in supervision meetings looked forward to by many.

On a personal level, living in Edinburgh introduced Bjarne to many important people in his life. The arrival of Arne Kruse in 1989 as the department's Lecturer in Norwegian marked

3. Another significant Scandinavian Studies department of yesteryear, cf. Mennie 1973: 10–12. Duncan Mennie was responsible for almost single-handedly building Newcastle's department during the 1940s and 1950s at what was then Durham's King's College, and his impact on both SSNS and Scandinavian Studies was significant, cf. Scobbie 1998: 7–10.

the beginning of an enduring friendship,⁴ and their colleague Peter Graves went on to become a next-door neighbour, while love blossomed with the department's Swedish teaching fellow Gunilla Blom, and they married in 1993. When not at their Edinburgh base, Bjarne and Gunilla are to be found in northern Denmark, northern Sweden, or sometimes – as a *lagom* compromise – in their small flat in Gothenburg.

Yet it was surely as a writer, editor, and well-rounded researcher that Bjarne really came into his own in Edinburgh. A perusal of Bjarne's publications reveals an output that was measured and thoughtful, yet always impactful.⁵ As one might expect over a career as long and fruitful as his, Bjarne's interests developed over time, but there is – to literally translate a Danish phrase – a red thread to be found binding them together.

A nascent interest in the proletarian literature of Denmark, especially first-person narratives and works focused on minorities, began to morph into explorations of modernity, place, and topography in the literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The remit of this work also assumed an increasingly broader view, encompassing all of Scandinavia. While a rich sideline in considerations of the interplay between Danish and Scottish literature is also in evidence, Bjarne's scholarship came to focus on many of the aforementioned themes in the works of seminal Swedish writers such as Selma Lagerlöf and Eyvind Johnson.

To fully grasp the impact and robust variety in Bjarne's work, 2007 serves as an excellent illustration. That year marked the

4. Arne and Bjarne (or Arnie and Barney, as they were fondly known to several Edinburgh University servitors) would argue this friendship was based on mutual passions for hillwalking and the rich literary traditions of Scandinavia, but many external observers also noted an inclination towards amused playfulness never better illustrated than by their focus on the preparation of mulled wine for the annual departmental Lucia procession in December.

5. For a full overview of Bjarne's publications, see the bibliography on p.353.

publication of an edited volume on new approaches to H.C. Andersen; another on peripheral literature in the Nordic region and Scotland; also his monograph exploring nation, mobility, and modernity in Lagerlöf's *Nils Holgersson*.⁶ This editor notes that on more than one occasion, the latter work has been described by multiple experts in the field as the definitive and final volume on the matter. It would be no surprise were Bjarne's ongoing work examining the legacy of Nobel Prize laureate Eyvind Johnson to assume a corresponding position in future.

Bjarne's impact on published scholarship elsewhere has also been significant. He served as editor of *Northern Studies* from 1996 until 2004, latterly working alongside his good friend Arne Kruse, and has been a frequent contributor to the journal over the years. His past editorial board appointments have included the *European Journal of Scandinavian Studies*, while many of his former students and doctoral candidates have gone on to serve not only SSNS but also sister organisations and periodicals such as the Viking Society and *Scandinavica*. All the while, he continued to deliver his own stellar research and teaching. Writing in 2017, Janet Garton noted that 'UCL and Edinburgh are now holding the fort as the only two institutions left in the UK to offer a full provision of modern Scandinavian languages at honours level. They are doing so splendidly, with active teaching and research departments and a team of energetic researchers'.⁷ Edinburgh has much to thank Bjarne Thorup Thomsen for in this respect.

The breadth of research, notes, and insights offered in this volume are a tribute to Bjarne's own wide-ranging interests on both a personal and research level, serving very much as refractions of Scandinavia. The twenty-four contributors explore

6. 'Thorup Thomsen 2007a; 2007b; Thorup Thomsen et al. 2007.

7. Garton 2017: 98.

literary themes and trends, concepts of identity, travel, exchanges across the North Sea, visual representations, history, and much more. While the editor has endeavoured to bring order to this smörgåsbord of tributes, the reader is encouraged to dip in and out at their leisure. They will not be disappointed. In addition to a number of shorter, more personal notes, there are twelve chapters in this volume which have been peer-reviewed,⁸ and the editor wishes to acknowledge the input of the anonymous reviewers who were so generous with their time and expertise.

The volume begins with two portraits of Bjarne: his wife, Gunilla, explores Bjarne's early years and traces his trajectory into the world of literary scholarship, while his brother, Jakob, reflects on how the adventures of two young Danes armed with Britrail passes sowed the seeds of a future Scottish life. The volume then turns its attention to representations of Scandinavia, beginning with a touching and personal survey of three Scandinavian runic conversion monuments by Bjarne's long-term Edinburgh colleague, Arne Kruse. Leaping forward more than a millennium, Helen Robinson gives a succinct account of the renowned Swedish painter Anders Zorn's sojourn in Cornwall, while Eric Cain contemplates the significance of light and dark in Carl Theodor Dreyer's 1932 classic *Vampyr*. Next, C. Claire Thomson considers the interplay between the British and Danish documentary film movements in the late 1940s, and the section draws to a close with brief postcards from Steinvör Pálsson and Dana Caspi.

The following section offers a literary lens on Scandinavia as it revisits and re-examines some of Bjarne's favourite strands of research: travel, place, and literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. This begins with an account of the Norwegian feminist author Amalie Skram as a travel writer

8. Chapters 3, 4, 6, 9, 11, 13, 14, 15, 17, 18, 20, and 22.

by Janet Garton. Anna Bohlin then provides a delightful interlude that details Bjarne's aptitude as a research mentor, before Barbara Tesio-Ryan compares works by Karen Blixen and Selma Lagerlöf. A further postcard from Lisbeth Stenberg interrogating Lagerlöf's transnationalism is the prelude for a chapter by Anders Öhman that examines Swedish novelist Olof Högberg's attempt to analogously novelise the colonisation of northern Sweden.

Moving on to a section exploring the many faces of Denmark during Bjarne's lifetime and the formation of modern Denmark in reality and the popular imagination, John Gilmour begins with a chapter reflecting on Danish resistance hero Gösta Winkler and his experiences in 1945. Guy Puzey then investigates the emergence of the anti-hero in Danish children's literature of the 1970s, drawing on two key works. Charlotte Berry's postcard describes Bjarne as a recruiter to all things Danish, while Henk van der Liet's chapter on island writing within the broader multidisciplinary context of islands as a whole is rich in detail and Danish examples. Ruairidh Tarvet closes the section with a survey of the Danish community in twenty-first century Scotland.

The last section presents understandings of Scandinavia from a variety of perspectives. Dominic Hinde begins with a whistlestop tour of the way that Britain has viewed Scandinavia through its journalistic reporting, while Ian Giles explores the modern-day British focus on Scandinavian literature through the lens of Danish author Peter Høeg. Bjarne's Edinburgh colleagues Julie Larsen and Anja Tröger then follow. The former provides insight into the quiet wisdom of Bjarne, while the latter digs deep into the themes of anger and hypocrisy in the contemporary work of Norwegian author Vigdis Hjorth. Finally, Fiona Twycross provides a light-hearted account of exactly what the Vikings – and their Scandinavian successors

– have done for us, and how learnings from them can be applied elsewhere. The volume concludes with a comprehensive bibliography of Bjarne’s work, preceded by a meticulously crafted note of appreciation from Laura Alice Chapot, who gives close attention to the language of Bjarne Thorup Thomsen the writer.

It will not surprise the reader that in the preparation of this manuscript, the responses from all individuals approached (regardless of eventual participation) has been one of tremendous positivity. This editor has long held that Bjarne is one of the most well-liked academics of recent decades, and it has been gratifying to find that others hold him in similarly high esteem. On a personal note, I must also offer my heartfelt thanks to Bjarne. While memories of our early meetings have been blurred by time, a chance encounter with Bjarne in Uppsala where we firmly agreed that the best cafés were those offering unlimited coffee refills left me with the firm impression that he was a man of taste. His input since then as a teacher and mentor has inspired me in my own journey as a researcher and translator, while the sangfroid and grace with which advice and feedback has *always* been provided has instilled much-needed calm and served as an example to live by. I know with certainty that a great many of us feel this way.

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