

On the Right Frequency

Charlotte Berry

My obsession with Denmark began as a child, with a language-obsessed father sending off regularly to the Danish Tourist Board for travel brochures. We never actually made it to Denmark as a family until I was living there in later years, but I always wondered at the time what Denmark was like. Whilst living in East Anglia, it was occasionally possible to get Scandinavian radio (language unidentified!), but that stopped when we moved over to the Welsh border. Scandinavia seemed very far away in the days before the internet.

I followed in the family footsteps and did language A levels, and was looking for a new language to go with German at university. Arabic, Spanish, Chinese, and Italian were ruled out immediately – too hot, too far. I looked at the Slavic languages listed in the university course directory in the local library but couldn't imagine going behind the Iron Curtain so soon after it had fallen. So Scandinavia popped up again, prompted by memories of those photographs in the Danish Tourist Board catalogues. Four intriguing countries: Finland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark. Which to choose? Watching ski-jumping on telly had put me off the first three: too mad, too cold. Denmark seemed the ideal compromise; it was a bit nearer everywhere else, and a ferry ride from a few English ports. A flat landscape

– like East Anglia with its big skies. And lashings of Danish pastries and Hans Christian Andersen. Perfect.

At this point, I hadn't met any Danish people (few and far between in Herefordshire, except one house in the neighbouring road which bizarrely had its own flagpole and the Dannebrog flying). I had no clue what the language sounded like. It looked a bit like German, so how hard could it be? So I trekked up the M5/M6 in the summer of 1994 for a university open day, having no idea what to expect and what the Scandinavian department would be like.

In 1994, Scandinavian was still located at 18 Buccleuch Place, and the department occupied a flat on the first floor. It seemed a very cosy place (in fact, *'hyggelig'*, as I was to discover later on), and had Danish newspapers available; I had never seen one before. I don't remember meeting any of the staff there, but I do definitely remember meeting Bjarne for the first time as the departmental rep, in one of the David Hume Tower faculty rooms. Bjarne was friendly and reassuring, and emitted a quietly confident enthusiasm in all directions Scandinavian. I was impressed – going to university was a big jump, especially to study a mystery language, but suddenly everything seemed less scary and eminently doable. I met a fellow prospective student who also applied. We met again at a UCL interview but agreed between ourselves that Edinburgh, course and city, seemed much more like it. And we both duly arrived in autumn 1995 to start Danish, amongst other things.

There were thirteen of us in the Danish 1A class. Oddly, three of us had connections with the visually impaired world, and Ida, our lector, couldn't quite believe it: two students with parents who taught Braille, and another who trained guide dogs.

We didn't see that much of Bjarne in first year; we were busy getting to grips with the language. I struggled not to keep putting verbs in subordinate clauses at the end of the sentence

– Ida had quite the Paddington Bear stare for those moments. But we felt very pleased with ourselves when we finished reading our first real book, *Gummi-Tarzan*, and then we moved up to proper literature classes with Bjarne. By this time, we were reduced to a hard core of five students in second year, and we got to know Bjarne very well in those small tutorials; they were such a haven compared to the much larger English Language lectures.

Despite us still struggling with the challenges of Danish pronunciation (I noticed the Scottish students seemed much better at this than the English!), Bjarne's bottomless patience and kindness encouraged me to sign up to go to Copenhagen as an Erasmus student for my third year. Indirectly, this decision meant I found my future career as an archivist during my Erasmus year.

Whilst struggling to keep up with a class on medieval Danish history, the tutor (an archivist from the National Archives) took us to see the stupendous Arnamagnænske Institute and its Icelandic saga manuscripts. I realised that this was a possible career, although it took a few years more to find my way. Again, Bjarne made his input into my future life's direction indirectly, through encouraging me to apply for a scholarship with the Anglo-Danish Society to study history at Aarhus for a semester, and then helping to set me up teaching English at a folk high school nearby through the European Voluntary Service after I graduated. All this gave me the thinking time to sort myself out and to make the transition into professional life as an archivist.

I still kept in touch with the department from a distance, but then moved back to Edinburgh in 2007 for a job and found myself able to consider doing a part-time PhD. Having always regretted not taking Bjarne's fourth year honours course in children's literature, I took that as my focus, and started on a

six-year marathon research project. I don't think I'd have taken that bold step if Bjarne hadn't still been ploughing the Danish furrow in the department! Even now, nearly ten years since getting my PhD ready to submit in 2013, I still cannot quite believe I even started it, let alone finished it. Having heard horror stories from an archive colleague about bloodthirsty supervisors aggressively protecting their own research interests and piling on the written work, my relatively stress-free progression through my studies with Bjarne at the helm seemed a bit too good to be true. I loved the research itself but disliked the writing up and analysis phases intensively. Was I doing enough work? Was it good enough for PhD level? Was Bjarne being too kind, too positive? Was he being a rigorous enough critic? Was I going to bomb out at the viva, when it would be revealed that I was a complete fraud?

Happily all ended well – my viva was a joyful opportunity to discuss my research with the external examiner, who had a very similar research focus to mine, and Bjarne sat there throughout oozing serene tranquillity and positive vibes. And I found that I'd joined the (at that time) select ranks of those finishing PhDs in Scandinavian Studies at Edinburgh.

Only very occasionally have my Danish skills been useful to me as an archivist; one career highlight was presenting a paper at an international conference held at Møller-Mærsk in Copenhagen, where I got to meet the Georg Jensen and Lego archivists. What incredible collections they must have! Most recently, whilst working at an Oxford college, I became very possibly somewhat overexcited when taking in and cataloguing an album of Danish-language press cuttings documenting the college cricket XI's tour to Denmark in the 1950s, arranged by the Danish ambassador, who had been a student at Oxford.

My Danish is becoming increasingly creaky these days, and I am too embarrassed to email Bjarne in Danish with all those

toe-curling mistakes now, but I still end my messages with ‘*Bedste Hilsner*’ in true Bjarne style, and keep trying to resurrect my language proficiency when time permits. Life as a Danophile is much easier these days online, but there is no substitute for the real thing. I’ve recently found a Danish neighbour who is kindly letting me practise my bad Danish on her; happily, she also hails from North Jutland and has an accent similarly kind to the ear as Bjarne’s. So I feel I am in good hands. And in twenty years working as an archivist, I’ve never come across any handwriting quite as clear and beautifully crafted as Bjarne’s – now this is really a true skill to celebrate in these digital days. So, to Bjarne: *tusind tak* for everything, and especially for being on my wavelength at key life moments!