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Rewriting the Homeland – Danish Islands: Real, Imagined, and Between the Lines

Henk van der Liet

Ingen kan forlate en øy, en øy
er et kosmos i et nøtteskall, der stjernene
sover i graset under snøen.
Men det hender at noen forsøker.
Og på en sånn dag
blåser en sakte østavind.

Roy Jacobsen, *De usynlige* (2013)[1]

Introduction[2]

A few years ago, I was invited to teach a class in a course entitled 'Islands – Models for our Planet, Metaphors for our World'. I

1. 'No one can leave an island, an island is a cosmos in a nutshell where the stars sleep in the grass underneath the snow. But sometimes someone tries. And on such a day, a gentle breeze blows from the east.' Jacobsen 2013: 21. Unless indicated otherwise, all translations are by the author of this essay.
2. Minor parts of this chapter were presented at the conference *The Tower at the End of the World*, held at The Nordic House in Tórshavn, the Faroe Islands on 11–14 May 2017. My warmest thanks go to Bergur Rönne Moberg, Copenhagen University for inviting me.

found the title of the course intriguing, mainly because of the metaphoric juxtaposition of the world with insularity, and thus, I accepted the invitation for the lecture. I also felt honoured, because when I studied the course manual it turned out that the majority of the participants, both the teaching staff as well as the students enrolled in the course, predominantly came from the science faculty and the social sciences, and not from the humanities, my own home base. The fact that I would be teaching in a new disciplinary environment, with colleagues with scholarly expertise other than my own, made it even more attractive for me to teach this class.

The reason why the organisers of the programme invited me in the first place was simply because they knew about my personal interest in islands and they themselves had become aware of the disciplinary hiatus in the curriculum. A wide variety of aspects concerning islands were taken care of in this multidisciplinary programme, but cultural – and notably literary – approaches to islands and 'islandness' were, by and large, absent.[3]

So, there I was, a literary scholar among colleagues from the 'science' faculty, who were familiar with gathered data, doing statistics and anthropological, botanical, or geological fieldwork, while I had to persuade the students to study islands in a radically different manner. Primarily by reading books, watching films, and studying images, I showed them the various iconographies and representations of both real as well as imagined islands, hoping to convince them of the viability and importance of these aesthetic sources to apprehend islands also as metaphors, as frames of reference for a variety of different phenomena – insularity as a tangible and concrete phenomenon

3. For additional information on this particular university course, see the review essay by the organisers Norder and Rijsdijk 2016: 673–686.

but also as a cultural denominator in general terms.[4] Last but not least, I tried to make the students aware of the importance of thinking about islands diachronically, i.e. to study islands and island-imagery historically, and – because my main field of expertise is Scandinavia – my prime examples were from the north.

This essay is one of the spinoffs of this course. First it will take a brief look at 'island' and 'insularity' in a historical and literary context, especially pertaining to Denmark. Then it will discuss the 'discovery' of islands as part of a 'new' Danish national identity in the course of the nineteenth century. Next, focus shifts to early-twentieth-century literary expeditions, their spinoff, and, finally, how in our postmodern era these literary explorations of Denmark as an archipelago culminate – or rather implode – into a deeply fascinating minimalist expedition report which, in my opinion, opens new vistas for future island literatures.

The unknown backyard

In numerous ways, the island as a notion or a concept is a difficult entity to deal with. Islands can be understood as places of isolation and captivity – like prison islands – but they can also be experienced as the quintessence of liberty, and function as exemplary models – as often is the case in utopian island-novels and idealising websites for luxurious holiday resorts at tropical destinations. Furthermore, the word island does not exclusively identify a territory surrounded by water. We can also use the word metaphorically, e.g. when linguists

4. For a critical discussion of the scholarly relevance of these different approaches to the field of Island Studies, see Hay 2013: 209–232.

study minority languages, their position in relationship to the dominant majority language can be described as 'a linguistic island'. In modern urban traffic planning it is not uncommon to refer to areas strictly reserved for pedestrians as 'traffic islands', because they intend to offer refuge to the vulnerable pedestrian in urban environments dominated by motorised traffic.[5] Even in contemporary clinical psychology, the island metaphor is utilised as a tool in its self-critical disciplinary discourse, in order to concretise the discrepancy between the clinic as professional space and the outside world.[6]

Thus, the word 'island' is employed for various purposes and with different connotations. And it is not surprising that lots of painters, writers, musicians, and filmmakers are attracted to insularity as an artistic theme, as islands seem to question everyday notions of space, place, and trigger our imagination.[7]

The island as a literary theme – narrowing the topic of this essay down to literature – has a long pedigree, going all the way back to Odysseus, and probably even further back into prehistorical times. And most islands in literature are no pure representations of the idyllic or the utopian but rather combinations of both, mixing utopian as well as dystopian visions of confinement. Islands can also be part of other, far more concrete narratives, e.g. islands that are envisaged as peripheral in relationship to the rest of a particular culture or nation. This

5. The phrase 'traffic island' was first recorded from app. 1935, when the increase in motorised traffic made it necessary to separate traffic lanes and participants from each other, especially in urban surroundings. The second paragraph of the European Charter of Pedestrians' Rights, which was adopted in 1988 (European Session Document A 2-0154/88) by the European Parliament, e.g. states that: 'The pedestrian has the right to live in urban or village centres tailored to the needs of human beings and not to the needs of the motor car and to have amenities within walking or cycling distance.'

6. See Desai 2018: 1–25.

7. See e.g. Holm 2000: 329–336; Royle 2014: 102 ff.

has – notably in the colonial era – been the dominant political and cultural discourse. But the reverse can also be observed: islands that seem to represent the very essence – or even stereotype – of a region, nation, or an entire culture. An interesting development in this respect is that the decline of the European colonial empires in the twentieth century went hand in hand with the (re)discovery of their own national 'Hinterland'. Once the colonial enterprise began to dissolve, the 'Motherland' had to be (re)described and charted and sometimes even colonised 'from within', symbolically compensating for loss of overseas territories, power, and prestige.

A significant example of such a radical reorientation – resulting in a shift from a global understanding of the national identity towards a far more introspective alternative self-understanding – happened in Denmark during the nineteenth century. In that case the (re)discovery – or maybe one could even label it the invention – of the then diminished country as a new nation with a subsequently new identity was initiated several times during this era. Before the romantic era, the inventory of the country was inaugurated as a royal enterprise, mainly in order to acquire a more reliable system of taxation of the population, but later the gathering and presenting of information about the nation became a crucial element in the nation-building process itself. After the disastrous loss of Norway as an integral part of the kingdom in 1814, the loss of the southern provinces of Jutland to Germany in 1864, and finally the sale of the Virgin Islands to the US in 1917 mark the implosion of Denmark in the nineteenth century, causing a reboot and redefinition of its national identity, or at least forcing a radical makeover of the prevailing national narrative to take place. In the course of the twentieth century, this process initiated a number of 'internal expeditions' with a clear cultural and literary focus, notably to 'discover', describe, and proliferate knowledge about 'remote' parts of the 'new' nation.

The earliest examples of this interest in 'exotic' folklore mainly dealt with oral traditional culture, and an important role must be assigned to the ethnographic collectors Evald Tang Christensen (1843–1929) and Svend Grundtvig (1824–83).[8] Furthermore, inspired by the ideas of the first Danish art historian N.L. Høyen (1798–1870), numerous painters of the so-called Danish Golden Age also started to prefer local sceneries instead of exotic, mainly Italian, localities and landscapes. As a result, the peninsula of Jutland was 'discovered'[9] and marine painting flourished.[10]

Apart from this cultural reinforcement of the dented Danish national identity, 'real' expeditions to the lesser-charted periphery of the diminished nation also started to pick up, primarily bound for the Arctic, especially Greenland.

Scandinavia

As most foreigners will know, the Scandinavian countries – as far as their natural conditions are concerned – are quite diverse. Norway is characterised by mountains and magnificent fjords, while in Sweden it is impossible to overlook its many forests and woodlands. Finland, on the other hand, is known for its countless lakes, Denmark for its gentle and hilly landscape, while Iceland stands out because of its rugged volcanic terrain,

8. Evald Tang Kristensen (1843–1929) collected innumerable amounts of songs and ballads, especially in Jutland. His work appeared in a range of anthologies a.o. *Jyske Folkeminder I–II* (1871–76), while Svend Grundtvig (1824–83) mainly collected and published traditional Danish fairy tales.

9. Cf. an interesting article on the 'discovery' of Jutland by a number of nineteen-century Danish painters is Oelsner 2019: 278–291. See also Frandsen 1996.

10. A sign of the thematic introspection in the visual arts is the upswing in Danish marine painting in the same period. See Helleland 2021: 11–12.

and the Faroe Islands for their Atlantic weather conditions and rich foliage. Each of these countries has distinct geographical features and different natural characteristics, which lead to a wide variety of landscapes, flora, and fauna. Some of these aspects have received additional attention as particular markers of national identity and thus have become crucial in defining each country's cultural identity.

Although the differences between these countries are enlarged and put forward as quintessential national denominators, we can still speak of Scandinavia in unifying terms, albeit that the name then primarily must be understood as an expression used in the realm of culture (e.g. in Scandinavian design or Scandinavian noir) – instead of a clear geographical entity (just try to draw the borders of Scandinavia). Understood in this way, Scandinavia is formed by common history, linguistic roots, and parallel socio-cultural developments, rather than common geographical features.

But in my opinion there still is another common feature that is part of the fabric that composes Scandinavia – namely the role of insularity in the overall conceptualisation of Scandinavia.[11] Of course, the inhabitants of the Scandinavian countries tend to stress the differences between the various countries of the north, often emphasising their variety, instead of their similarities, in defining their cultural identity. Just think of the uncontested predilection of the Norwegians for hiking, the Swedes for their Vasaloppet, the Finns for their plunge into the icy water after sauna, the Islandic affection for hot springs, and the Faeroese for their traditional whaling event ('*grindadráp*'), while the Danes boast about their beer and *hygg*e. Strangely enough, the notion of insularity does not immediately jump to mind as one of the typical characteristics of Scandinavia. But in my opinion, it should.

11. See also Frank 2017: 187; Wærp 2017: 147.

The first thing to do is literally to find out what we have in mind when we talk about islands. We should start by looking through an insular lens and understand islands as part of geographies, which either are real or imaginary, i.e. we must try to find islands that can be found on maps and visited, islands that merely exist in art and literature, and, finally, islands that belong to both worlds. This essay presents a case study, a brief journey into the historiography of islands, with special attention to Scandinavia and in particular Denmark in the twentieth century.

Landfast or seaborne

In comparison to the rest of Scandinavia, Denmark stands out somewhat bleakish, at least as far as landscape and climate are concerned. Denmark is – no harm intended – extremely unimpressive, as there are no high mountains, no volcanoes nor any spectacular fjords, and the climate is relatively mild. Compared to the rest of Scandinavia, Denmark is, frankly speaking, quite an ordinary place.

Nevertheless, there is at least one striking phenomenon that is characteristic of the Danish landscape, and that to some extent determines the identity of the Danes. This feature may at first glance be overlooked, but it is important, because the Danes do not inhabit one country, but – in a way – a number of small countries or a bunch of 'social biotopes'. After all, according to most sources, the country consists of some 400 islands.[12]

The fact that Denmark is a collection of many different islands also resonates in the third stanza of the Danish national

12. According to Wikipedia there are 1,419 Danish islands larger than 100 m^2, of which 443 have a name and seventy-eight are inhabited. See https://da.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beboede_danske_øer.

anthem, 'Der er et yndigt Land' also known as 'Fædrelands-Sang' (1819), which goes like this:

> *Og* ædle *Qvinder, skiønne Møer,*
> *Og Mænd og raske Svende*
> *Beboe de Danskes* Øer.
>
> And noble women, beautiful maidens,
> and men and brisk swains
> inhabit the islands of the Danes.

The author of the text of the Danish national anthem, Adam Oehlenschläger (1779–1850), draws attention to the fact that Denmark comprises a respectable number of islands, i.e. land-masses entirely surrounded by (salt) water.

The sea and the country's insularity has had a huge impact on its history and culture. Before the introduction of modern land-based traffic infrastructures, such as railroads, bridges, motorways, and tunnels, travel by boat was the predominant form of transportation in Denmark. And narratives, like the national anthem, that support and solidify the national self-image, show a clear consciousness of the nation's seaborne identity, e.g. by constantly repeating the myths and iconography of the so-called Viking Age.

This image of the Viking mariner was often contested by a likewise potent counter-mythology rooted in pre-historic farming in Denmark. The framing of Denmark as a country primarily built on agricultural ancestry became the dominant trope in the nineteenth and twentieth century, due to the persuasiveness of archaeologists, literati, and politicians. Especially after the demise of the Danish fleet in the final years of the Napoleonic wars and the lost battles with Germany in 1864, the Danes seemed to prefer introspection and understand

themselves as a land-based instead of a seaborne nation connected to the rest of the globe.

One of the few mavericks who opposed this one-sided cultural image is the author Carsten Jensen (1952). Jensen focuses on the maritime history of the island of Ærø in his seminal novel *Vi, de druknede* (2006)[13] as a complaint against the perversion of Danish history by prioritising land over sea.[14]

Long before the age of the internet, the sea was the information superhighway par excellence. In the past, islanders would often be better informed about what was going on in the rest of the world, precisely because the sea was their open source of information and communication. And although sailing always has been a perilous endeavour, it still was faster and less dangerous than most land-bound forms of transportation.

Of course, this has changed radically in the course of the twentieth and twenty-first century, not only in Denmark but globally. One of the consequences of the increase in travel on land – and through the air – combined with the growth of urbanisation and globalisation was the initial depopulation of numerous small islands. Later, as one of the effects of the digital age, the depopulation – at least in part – seems to slow down and in some cases is even reversed. Living on remote and scarcely populated islands has become an increasingly attractive option to newcomers, due to the internet.[15]

13. The book also appeared in English translation as *We, the Drowned* (2011).

14. See Frank 2017: 200. Recently Søren Frank published an interesting plea for an ecocritical, 'amphibian' literary approach which deals with Siri Ranva Hjelm Jacobsen's *Havbrevene* (2020), advocating an 'oceanic perspective on planetary and human history' (Frank 2021: 81).

15. Cf. https://danske-smaaoer.dk.

Mapping the nation

As a result of the Enlightenment and the European colonial enterprise of the eighteenth century, huge amounts of time and energy were dedicated to exploring, prospecting, and mapping the surface of the earth, often motivated by commercial or military interests, or both. The urge to explore, describe, and map the overseas possessions of the nation lead in the case of Denmark in the early eighteenth century e.g. to the description of Greenland by the missionary Hans Egede (1686–1758), *Det gamle Grønlands Nye Perlustration etc.* (1741), while the scholar Árni Magnússon (1663–1730), on a surveying mission to Iceland in the beginning of the eighteenth century (1702–12) not merely described the country but also assembled an impressive collection of medieval manuscripts there, which became his most important and lasting legacy.

As far as the Danish motherland is concerned, one of the richest illustrated descriptions of the country was, in the middle of the eighteenth century, published by the historian and antiquary Erik Pontoppidan (1698–1764) – *Den Danske Atlas eller Konge-Riget Dannemark* […] *Lands-Beskrivelse* (1763–81) – in no less than seven sturdy tomes.[16] Later, in the nineteenth century, and especially after the separation of Norway in 1814 and the loss of the southern provinces to Germany in 1864,

16. The complete title of this work is comprehensive and summarises the contents adequately: *Den danske atlas eller konge-riget Dannemark, med dets naturlige egenskaber, elementer, indbyggere, væxter, dyr og andre affødninger, dets gamle tildragelser og nærværende omstændigheder i alle provintzer, stæder, kirker, slotte og herregaarde. Forestillet ved en udførlig lands-beskrivelse, saa og oplyst med dertil forfærdigede land-kort over enhver provintz, samt ziret med stædernes prospecter, grund-ridser, og andre merkværdige kaaber-stykker*. The first volumes were published by Erich Pontoppidan (1698–1764) while the project was finalised by Hans de Hofman (1763–93).

the re-charting of the country became a crucial project in the nation-building process.[17] As mentioned earlier, Denmark had to reboot and redefine its national identity. From being an intrinsic multilingual, multicultural and multi-ethnic society, the new cultural ideal of the geographically diminished nation state now became increasingly monolingual, monocultural and mono-ethnic. One of the most remarkable steps towards the realisation of this ideal of cultural homogeneity was the sale of the Virgin Islands to the US in 1917.[18]

The sale of the Virgin Islands coincided with a growing Danish interest in the Arctic. A number of expeditions, mainly focusing on Greenland, appropriated Greenland as an integral part of the Danish nation and its cultural self-image. While the tropical parts of the empire were sold off and erased from Danish collective memory, the Arctic part, on the other hand, became increasingly important, notably Greenland, while Iceland and the Faroese attracted far less attention.

Among the most renowned of the expeditions to the Arctic were the so-called Thule expeditions (1912–23), led by the anthropologist, writer, and adventurer Knud Rasmussen (1879–1933), but also other parts of the kingdom of Denmark were 'discovered', described, and amalgamated into a new national narrative under construction.

These expeditions were not primarily undertaken with the explicit objective of colonising or charting the 'lesser known' parts of the country but rather to bring them to the attention of the general public, in order to demonstrate the natural richness

17. An example of this tendency is Jens Peter Trap, *Statistisk-topographisk Beskrivelse af Kongeriget Danmark* (1856–59) in five volumes. Since its first appearance, this work has been revised and republished frequently. The latest version, the 6th edition in thirty-four volumes, is produced at present. Cf. http://trapdanmark.dk/om-os/det-nye-trap-danmark.
18. Olsen 2017: 320–347.

and cultural diversity of the nation, despite the loss of territory. Arctic expeditions and travels to Iceland and the Faroese were not merely a matter of putting hidden gems of the kingdom on display, nor purely to exoticise these peripheric parts of the nation, but rather a dual strategy: on the one hand to induce awareness of the uniqueness of the country as a commonwealth, and on the other to domesticise these remote places in order to procreate a sense of unity, i.e. a national identity despite the many dissimilarities with the 'Motherland'.[19]

In the slipstream of these expeditions to the far north, other parts of the nation were also described and brought to the attention of the general public, a process in which literature played a prominent role, thus paving the way for new, twentieth-century national narratives. And just as in the case of the Arctic expeditions, these expeditions to the 'lesser known' parts of the nation, especially the smaller islands, were primarily undertaken with the objective to bring them to the attention of the general public in order to register and preserve the cultural versatility of the country. And it is here that insularity stands out as a cultural resource that could be made productive in the process of rethinking Denmark's national identity.

Exploring the heartlands

As mentioned earlier, the Danish national anthem speaks of the country's insularity in positive terms, and islands also play a vital role in Danish literary history.[20] Nevertheless, Danish

19. See i.a. Jensen 2012; Thisted and Gremaud (eds) 2020.

20. Danish literary history contains numerous islands. To mention just a few: the play *Peder Paars* (1719–20) written by the well-known Dano-Norwegian playwright Ludvig Holberg (1684–1754), which has the island of Anholt as its backdrop. Islands also take centre stage in twentieth-century

literature does not differ from most other European literary traditions – sometimes islands function as metaphors or metonymies signifying isolation, remoteness, or even incarceration. In other instances, islands represent miniature models of the world, mankind, or the universe as a whole.[21]

In the course of the twentieth century, a number of illustrated multi-volume literary expedition reports, primarily dealing with Danish islands, were published. The project I would like to focus on here is the remarkable, massive three-volume work *De danskes* Øer, I–III (1926–28) by the author and Arctic explorer Achton Friis (1871–1939) and the painter Johannes Larsen (1867–1961), a project which exclusively dealt with the country's many small islands.[22] Some years after the publication of these three sturdy tomes, the two authors decided to follow up on the vast success of the first volumes and added another two volumes to the series, *Danmarks store* Øer, I–II (1936–37),

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Danish literature, such as in the novel *Barbara* (1939) by the Faroese author Jørgen-Frantz Jacobsen (1900–38) and *Løgneren* (1950) by Martin A. Hansen (1909–55), one of the most famous modern existentialist Danish novels situated on a fictitious island (Sandø). More contemporary literary texts dealing with life on Danish islands are *Tilbage til Anholt* (1978) by Vagn Lundbye (1933–2016), *Havside sommer* (1993) by Henning Mortensen (1940–) featuring Fanø, and *Øer* (2016) by Rakel Haslund-Gjerrild (1988–) with Bornholm as backdrop. Other 'insular' authors are: Vibeke Grønfeldt; Thorkild Bjørnvig (both dealing with Samsø); Thorkild Hansen (the historical Danish Virgin Islands); Erik Aalbæk Jensen (Nekselø); Frank Jæger (Langeland); Klaus Rifbjerg (Amager); Dennis Gade Kofod (Bornholm); Carsten Jensen (Ærø), and many more. See also Frandsen 2012: 8–14.

21. The latter is e.g. the case in *Tårnet ved verdens ende* (1976) a collection of short stories by William Heinesen (1900–91), translated into English as *The Tower at the World* (2018). In a way, the near absence of the word island itself in Heinesen's book (where it is only used once) emphasises and explains that in Heinesen's art, insularity is not necessarily connected to physical islands, but rather that it is a quintessential, metaphysical aspect of it.

22. Friis defines an 'island' as a piece of land surrounded by seawater. Cf. Friis 1926: 8.

this time focusing on the country's larger, more densely populated and well-known islands.[23]

Achton Friis' and Johannes Larsen's project mirrors in many ways the Arctic explorations, in which Friis himself had been actively involved.[24] And the most remarkable feature of *De danskes Øer* is the fact that it does not describe an expedition to an exotic faraway destination. On the contrary, it records parts of the home country, 'discovering' and describing the Danish cultural heartlands, those parts of the country that most citizens hardly new existed, let alone would apprehend as part of their own cultural heritage.[25]

One of the intriguing aspects of the published 'reports' of the insular expeditions by Friis and Larsen is, of course, the fact that they travelled by boat and, in a way, enacted a 'real' expedition to some remote destination, like performing a reversed Viking exploration. Apart from describing people, traditions, vegetation, wildlife, and weather conditions, the books also offer lots of pictures, drawings, hand-drawn maps, and photographs. Looking at the printed volumes, it is obvious that *De danskes Øer* is meant to be an impressive, monumental, and prestigious work of national importance. One could call the book part of

23. Not merely the timing of the additional volumes – in the wake of the Second World War – is remarkable – that is also the case with the metamorphosis of the title of the first series: *Islands of the Danes* (i.e. of the people) were transformed into *Denmark's Islands* (i.e. islands of the nation). The larger islands described in the two volumes are: Funen, Langeland, Seeland, Lolland, Falster, Møn, and Bornholm.

24. E.g. Friis 1987.

25. Achton Friis had in 1906–08 been a member of the polar expedition to the barren north-eastern territory of Greenland, during which among others the leader of the expedition L. Mylius-Erichsen (1872–1907) died. Instead of venturing again to Greenland, Achton Friis was prompted by his colleague-author Jeppe Aakjær (1866–1930) to undertake an expedition in Denmark itself and 'explore and describe' the country's barely known archipelago.

an archive, a recording of a huge amount of social-geographical and historical data, embedded in a textual and visual narrative, in order to preserve a typical historical phenomenon, i.e. the living conditions on Danish islands in the wake of modernity. Hence, *De danskes Øer* clearly has a nostalgic undertone, and in some passages the text even reproduces the racist stereotypes and social-Darwinist misconceptions that were mainstream in early-twentieth-century public discourse.[26]

In the course of the twentieth century, daily life in Denmark changed profoundly, and of course this also happened on the country's islands. Or maybe one should say: especially on the islands, because they were, to some degree, more severely exposed to the onslaught of modernity, due to depopulation and the increasing importance of land-based transportation and communication, favouring the main land over islands and tarmac over waterways. Many island communities disappeared when shops and schools closed, while dwellings and farms were turned into summer cottages for holidaymakers and tourists.

Especially after the Second World War, and after the introduction of the modern welfare society, much of what Friis and Larsen had registered in their monumental *De danskes Øer* in the 1920s had disappeared by then, or was about to fall prey to oblivion. Maybe not so much out of nostalgia but rather because he wanted to preserve information about the folklore and especially the various insular lifestyles, the author Erik Aalbæk Jensen (1923–97) repeated and updated the work that had been done by Friis and Larsen, more than half a century earlier. In the company of his wife Hanne, Aalbæk Jensen

26. Also the fact, that the third member of the crew merely is referred to as 'Skipper' and not addressed by his given name, i.e. Christian Andersen, is a sign of the traditional and rock-steady social hierarchy on board the ship. See Houkjær 2006: 13.

visited as many inhabited islands in the Danish archipelago as possible in the 1970s with a tape recorder and a photo camera, eventually to disembogue in the lavishly illustrated eight-volume work *Livet på øerne* (1981–87). In the preface of the first volume, he explains his aims as follows:

> [*A*]*t fortælle om rejser, der blev gjort, om mennesker, vi traf, og vejr, vi var ude i, alt sammen sanset og oplevet fra fortællerens egen synsvinkel og fortalt videre så subjektivt og personligt, som man nu engang må, hvis man vil gøre sig håb om at nå det, der er fortællingens mål, læserens opmærksomhed.*[27]
>
> To tell about journeys that were made, people we met, and the weather we were out in, all sensed and experienced from the narrator's own point of view and narrated as subjectively and personally as one is permitted to do, if one hopes to reach the goal of the story, the reader's attention.

Since the 1970s, cultural change has not come to a halt – on the contrary – and the urge to update and revisit the sites that Friis, Larsen, and later Jensen had described and depicted seems to be even more urgent. Since new media technologies for publishing and disseminating information have accelerated, it is hardly surprising that updated versions of earlier works about Danish islands are in tune with new forms of representation.

In 2005, a series of documentary films called *Gensyn med De Danskes Øer* ('*Revisiting The Islands of the Danes*'), directed by Jørgen Flindt Pedersen (1940–2021), was shown on Danish television. The series clearly aimed at updating the work by Friis and Larsen, but this time on film. And in order to emphasise the close relationship between the two projects and to pay

27. Jensen 1981: 12–13.

homage to his predecessors, Flindt Pedersen used the same vessel as Friis and Larsen had done, nearly a century earlier.[28]

Danish islands appear to be an increasingly popular cultural subject. In the first decade of the twenty-first century and the year after Flindt Pedersen's TV series, the journalist Niels Houkjær published *De danske øer* (2006), a richly illustrated and well-documented guide to fifty of the smaller inhabited Danish islands.[29] Although Houkjær in the preface of his book claims that neither Achton Friis' and Johannes Larsen's multi-volume expedition reports nearly a century earlier, nor Aalbæk Jensen's extensive documentation from the 1980s had served as models for his work, this seems to be refuted by the text itself.[30]

The persistence and longevity of the Danish public interest in islands and culturally induced insular expedition reports since the beginning of the twentieth century was recently also demonstrated by two remarkable books by the journalist Christina Vorre, *Forladt* (2017, '*Abandoned*') and *De sidste øboere* (2019, '*The Last Islanders*'). In the introduction to *Forladt*, Vorre acknowledges that she is following in the footsteps of early-twentieth-century explorers and pays tribute to literary (!) adventurers as Ludvig Mylius-Erichsen (1872–1907) and Knud Rasmussen.

In a way, these two books wrap up the project initiated by Achton Friis and Johannes Larsen nearly a century earlier. The very fact that *Forladt* exclusively deals with uninhabited and deserted Danish islands and *De sidste øboere* describes islands that are on the brink of suffering the same fate, does – at least for

28. The vessel was called *Rylen* ('*The Sandpiper*'). The series is available here: https://ostfynsmuseer.dk/vare/gensyn-med-de-danskes-oeer-i.

29. Houkjær had previously in 2003 published a likewise richly illustrated and accessibly written cultural guide of *Denmark: Det er Danmark. En lystrejse gennem det danske landskab ('This is Denmark: an enjoyable journey through the Danish countryside')*.

30. E.g. in the introduction, where Houkjær describes his predecessors, a.o. Friis and Larsen, as well as Aalbæk Jensen. See Houkjær 2006: 12–13.

the time being – bring the process of (re)discovering Denmark as an archipelago of insular narratives to completion.[31] What lies ahead seems to be mere nostalgia: '*en opdagelsesrejse tilbage til det gemte og glemte ørige Danmark*'[32] ('a voyage of discovery back to the hidden and forgotten islands of Denmark').

Same place, different story

Vorre and Houkjær are not the last authors who try to rediscover and redescribe Danish islands. New media and new forms of literature will add new perspectives and dimensions to the ways in which islands can be approached in an up-to-date manner. A recent and, in my opinion, enticing experiment that meets today's conditions, originates from postmodern artistic philosophy. This approach does not aim at describing islands per se but rather wants to deconstruct the existing discourses on islands and subsequently transforms earlier textual and visual representations of islands into a bricolage or hybrid. This descriptive strategy is not utilised in order to produce new insular narratives but rather to rearrange existing texts and images and present them in new ways. Vorre and Houkjær clearly write in the context of the contemporary tourist industry,[33] catering for a culturally informed readership, while Friis and Larsen, as well as Aalbæk Jensen, had more literary, folkloristic, and, to some extent, political objectives.

31. An intriguing issue is whether the title of Vorre's latest book, *De sidste øboere* ('*The Last Islanders*'), which annunciates the end of insular habitation, is substantiated by the present situation and development. Notably the spread of modern forms of digital communication and the recent increase in the acceptance of working from home during the Covid-19 pandemic may well turn out to be game changers in the popularity of living on an island permanently.
32. Vorre 2017: 7.
33. In Danish the ambiguous term '*oplevelsesøkonomi*' is often applied to describe this phenomenon.

Figure 1: The covers of *De Danskes Øer*, Vol I, by Achton Friis and Johannes Larsen (1926) and Sigurd Buch Christensen's remake (2014). Reproduced by permission.

The future of literary explorations of Danish islands has definitely not come to a halt, and the abovementioned post-modern approach has already produced one fascinating but also unobtrusive little book with exactly the same title as the standard work by Achton Friis and Johannes Larsen from the 1920s. In 2014, the young poet and boatbuilder Sigurd Buch Kristensen (1988–) published his *De danskes Øer. Bind 1*. The booklet consists of no more than fifty-eight numbered pages (with quite a few blanks) containing fragmentary notes, some short poems, and a handful of photographic snapshots. Despite the title and the design of the cover of the book (see figure 1), the language and substance differ profoundly from the monumental work of Achton Friis and Johannes Larsen, and the eight volumes by Aalbæk Jensen. Nevertheless, it is obvious that Kristensen intends to engage in a literary dialogue with his predecessors, notably Friis' and Larsen's *De*

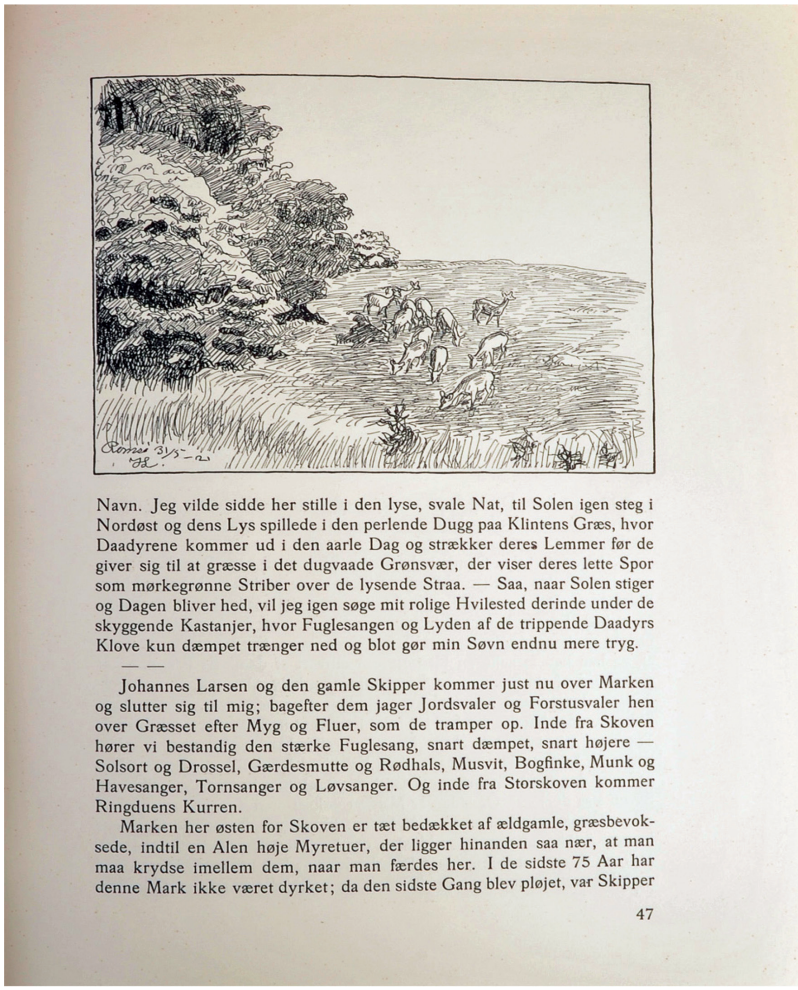
danskes Øer, and that he is less keen on touristic texts and guidebooks.[34]

Kristensen's miniature book not only deviates radically from Friis and Larsen's work because of the differences in size – fifty-eight against over 400 pages (of the first volume only). Nevertheless, Kristensen wants to write realistically and accurately in his 'expedition report': '*Vi skal dokumentere det hele*, siger jeg, *nu er vi antropologer, opdagelsesrejsende.*' ('We must document everything, *I say,* now we are anthropologists, explorers').[35] At the same time, the author deconstructs, transforms, and 'morphs' Friis' and Larsen's text, and in order to do this he employs a number of literary techniques, such as imitation, copying, ekphrasis, and parody. This can easily be observed by comparing the front covers of the two books – the similarities in layout and typography are striking – and also some of the organisational features of the contents refer back to Friis' and Larsen's original work.

With his own version of *De danskes Øer*, Kristensen follows in the footsteps of his illustrious predecessors, but at the same time he is aware of the necessity of alternative aesthetic approaches, in order to keep clear of the obtrusive touristic discourse. Kristensen is obviously inspired by the American poet and conceptual artist Kenneth Goldsmith's seminal work *Uncreative Writing. Managing Language in the Digital Age* (2011). Goldsmith (1961–) proposes a fundamentally different approach to literature and language and asks questions like: why should a text necessarily have to be new? Is everything that has been written until now really so bad that we really have to do it all over again and add even more text to the existing amount? Are there ways to use the same words and phrases

34. Kristensen is well aware of the difficulty to keep away from the touristic 'gaze'. See: Kristensen 2014: 13.
35. Ibid.: 18 (italics as in the original).

again i.e. to 'recycle' them and, at the same time, procreate new meanings? In his own work – especially in his concrete poetry – Goldsmith takes on these challenges, mixing content and form, fusing words and images, copying, pasting and plagiarising in order to create something new from existing linguistic and visual material. Goldsmith and other advocates of this alternative postmodernist literary practice call it *uncreative writing* or *patchwriting*.



Navn. Jeg vilde sidde her stille i den lyse, svale Nat, til Solen igen steg i Nordøst og dens Lys spillede i den perlende Dugg paa Klintens Græs, hvor Daadyrene kommer ud i den aarle Dag og strækker deres Lemmer før de giver sig til at græsse i det dugvaade Grønsvær, der viser deres lette Spor som mørkegrønne Striber over de lysende Straa. — Saa, naar Solen stiger og Dagen bliver hed, vil jeg igen søge mit rolige Hvilested derinde under de skyggende Kastanjer, hvor Fuglesangen og Lyden af de trippende Daadyrs Klove kun dæmpet trænger ned og blot gør min Søvn endnu mere tryg.

— —

Johannes Larsen og den gamle Skipper kommer just nu over Marken og slutter sig til mig; bagefter dem jager Jordsvaler og Forstusvaler hen over Græsset efter Myg og Fluer, som de tramper op. Inde fra Skoven hører vi bestandig den stærke Fuglesang, snart dæmpet, snart højere — Solsort og Drossel, Gærdesmutte og Rødhals, Musvit, Bogfinke, Munk og Havesanger, Tornsanger og Løvsanger. Og inde fra Storskoven kommer Ringduens Kurren.

Marken her østen for Skoven er tæt bedækket af ældgamle, græsbevoksede, indtil en Alen høje Myretuer, der ligger hinanden saa nær, at man maa krydse imellem dem, naar man færdes her. I de sidste 75 Aar har denne Mark ikke været dyrket; da den sidste Gang blev pløjet, var Skipper

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Drejø. Faldefærdig Gaard i Drejø By. I Forgrunden rykker den nye Tid frem i Form af „Cementpesten".

Drejø. Rasmus Mortensens Hus ved Gadekjæret.

Figure 2: Two sample pages from: Friis and Larsen, *De danskes Øer*, Vol I. © Johannes Larsen, *De danskes Øer*, 1926 c/o Pictoright Amsterdam 2022.

Sigurd Buch Kristensen lived most of his life on Ærø, a tiny island off the south-east coast of Funen. And in a sense his version of *De danskes Øer* has all the characteristics of a *sentimental journey*, in which he rekindles memories of his happy childhood on the island. At the same time, Buch Kristensen's book is a narrative about *coming of age,* falling in love, sultry summer evenings, etc. The sober and inobtrusive art of Achton Friis, his skilfully crafted lyrical prose, is subjected to parody and mimicry by Kristensen, and by doing so he also praises and salutes Friis and Larsen's masterpiece, while at the same time

producing a radically different and up-to-date vision of what contemporary insular art is capable of.

Notwithstanding the intriguing technique and postmodern approach that Kristensen's *De danskes Øer* contains and reflects on, the question remains regarding what the limits of creativity – or the conscious lack thereof – are. What are the limits of rewriting, reorganising, morphing, copying, and transforming existing texts? How can a recast text be approached critically?

As a mere example of this dilemma, the very first line of Kristensen's book is a quotation from a poem by Paul Celan (1920–70). But the quoted stanza is incomplete, one word is missing, and the question is, of course, whether this is just an unfortunate mistake or whether the omission is motivated artistically.[36] This example demonstrates how difficult it is when generic – and legal – limits are put aside in a creative process, and how readers should deal with the hermeneutic instability this brings about. In the case of the omitted word in Celan's poem, there seems to be no valid artistic argument, apart from careless quoting. On the other hand, according to the collectively written preface to Kristensen's book, the rewriting process may also entail '*mutation, amputation eller at lægge et værk i graven*' ('mutation, amputation or to bury a book completely') of an existing text, which in the end might explain the maltreatment of Celan's poem.[37]

Apart from recycling texts by other writers, such as Johannes V. Jensen's (1873–1950) national romantic poem 'Hvor smiler fager den danske kyst' (1925, 'How beauteous smiles the Danish coast'),[38] Kristensen also applies an amount of autobio-

36. The missing word is the word 'stand', first line, second stanza in the poem 'Stimmen', from Celan's collection *Sprachgitter* (1959). See Kristensen 2014: 9.
37. Kristensen 2014: 3.
38. Ibid.: 14. This poem has become a cherished, well-known song in the context of Danish national identity, set to music by the composer Oluf Ring (1884–1946). See Jensen 2006, vol. 2: 194–197.

graphical material, predominantly childhood memories.[39] And, in the entire text, time and space are closely connected and rendered instable, e.g. by mixing present and past tense, and by suddenly jumping from one location to another. And when the narrator refers to his childhood, time and space sometimes seem to become interchangeable: '*Der er ikke andet end barndom i det her landskab*'[40] ('There is only childhood in this landscape'), while in other fragments, time seems to come to a halt: '*Det er to dage tidligere, og vi ankommer til Strynø.*'[41] ('It is two days earlier, and we arrive at Strynø.') According to the terminology of Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975), instances like these can be called chronotopes:

> Time becomes, in effect, palpable and visible; the chronotope makes narrative events concrete, makes them take on flesh, causes blood to flow in their veins. […] And this is so thanks precisely to the special increase in density and concreteness of time markers – the time of human life, of historical time – that occurs within well-delineated special areas.[42]

Kristensen does not always slavishly follow in the footsteps of Achton Friis and Johannes Larsen – he also distances himself from them, e.g. by allowing his girlfriend on board during his 'expedition' and by not celebrating the nature and culture he is confronted with on the islands he visits and 'explores'. Kristensen's rewritten version of *De danskes Øer* contains on the other hand only a few precise descriptions of the natural and cultural surroundings he encounters, and sometimes he even turns to sarcasm, as if everything is lost anyway: '*Et kæmpe træ,*

39. See e.g. Kristensen 2014: 15
40. Ibid.
41. Kristensen 2014: 31.
42. Bakhtin 1981: 250.

er det en bøg? – jeg kan ikke huske det. // Men vinden tager i dets krone, mens vi er der, den kæmpe lunge flimrer, som en blodprop i hjertet flimrer i hjernen på en døende.' ('A giant tree, is it a beech? – I can't remember. // But the wind wags its crown while we are there, the giant lung flickers like a blood clot in the heart flickers in the brain of someone dying.')[43] The beech tree, the iconic representative of the romantic Danish landscape, changes into a bad omen, announcing death.[44]

Nevertheless, the similarities between Friis and Larsen's monumental project and Kristensen's miniature remake are plentiful, and despite the fact the texts appeared nearly a century apart, they do share the same structural features and a nostalgic, retrospective outlook, and they also agree on criticising the onslaught of modernity with respect to the future of the living conditions on the Danish islands.

Among the common formal characteristics are the already mentioned typographic similarities, but they also share similar captions like 'Intermezzo'. Furthermore, Friis and Kristensen are both keen on registering time, dates, and topographical names meticulously – in Kristensen's case this is an artificial, mock attitude. For Friis, gathering information is motivated by his encyclopaedic objectives, whereas Kristensen uses this type of information in a completely different playful fashion. For Kristensen, naming places implies investing meaning in them and thereby establishing a relationship, an attachment to them.[45] But this relationship is personal and emotional, instead of pragmatic and composed. And when Kristensen refers

43. Kristensen 2014: 24.

44. This point is also made by Kamilla Löfström in her newspaper review, see: Löfström 2014.

45. Here I am paraphrasing Tim Cresswell: 'When humans invest meaning in a portion of space and then become attached to it in some way (naming is one such way) it becomes a place'. Cresswell 2015: 16.

sensitively back to older jazz and rock albums,[46] invigorating youth and childhood memories, he at the same time criticises modernity's impact, e.g. through climate change and mass tourism. The sensation of freedom associated with sailing in the archipelago at the southern coast of Funen during summertime, as Kristensen does during his 'expedition', also provokes cynical commentary: '*havet er en motorvej for campister, ikke sejlere, det er til at dø over, så forbandet travlt alle har med at få sig en plads*'[47] ('the sea is a motorway for campers, not yachtsmen, it's a pain in the neck, so damn busy everyone is finding a spot').

In Danish politics as well as literature, insularity has long been associated with negative notions of isolation, backwardness, and imprisonment.[48] But, at the same time, islands can function as a metonymy, as time capsules where culture (presumably) does not change with the same pace as elsewhere, turning islands into refuges from modernity. In my reading of Sigurd Buch Kristensen's *De danskes Øer*, islands – at least in cultural and literary contexts – morph into chronotopes, liminal spaces that literally offer new sensations to the individual reader.[49] Kristensen's bricolage invites us to navigate narrated *insular* spaces which are composed of memories, myths, stories, pictures, and texts made by others and – last but not least – appealing to the senses: the salt of the wind, the roar and whisper of the ocean, the feeling of bare feet touching a warm sandy beach.

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46. References are made to albums by John Coltrane, *A Love Supreme* (1964), and Neil Young, *Time Fades Away* (1973) – Kristensen 2014: 23.
47. Kristensen 2014: 29, 34.
48. A rather stunning example is the proposal by some Danish politicians to deport refugees to the (deserted) island of Lindholm. See https://www.dr.dk/nyheder/politik/udviste-kriminelle-udlaendinge-sendes-til-oede-oe-i-stege-bugt.
49. See Bakhtin 1981: 84. See for critical approaches i.a.: Liet 1997: 120–128; Andersen 2021: 149–162.

Lessons learned?

What could the students, mentioned in the introduction of this essay, possibly have learned from my class on islands in a literary, artistic context? In what way can this case study, on insularity as a crucial ingredient in Danish national identity in the twentieth century, be extrapolated and operationalised scholarly?

In the first place, this essay should have demonstrated the importance of literary representations of islands in general. Achton Friis and Johannes Larsen, Erik Aalbæk Jensen, and Sigurd Buch Kristensen are authors who have produced fundamentally different works, notwithstanding the fact that they all engaged with the same geographical subject matter, i.e. islands.

The second lesson learned could be the awareness of how important temporality is in the study of islands. Increasing numbers of islands have been depopulated during the twentieth century, but this trend may well roll back in the near future.

Thirdly, each of the works on Danish islands discussed here can easily become a launching pad for new insular narratives, utilising different media and technologies and thus expanding the artistic possibilities and idioms on offer. Sigurd Buch Kristensen boils more than 400 pages down to less than 10% in an attempt to rewrite Friis and Larsen, merely offering a framework which readers and scholars alike have to deal with and fill in the blank spots themselves.

In a time when virtually all information on islands is available at the tip of a finger, projects like Achton Friis' and Erik Aalbæk Jensen's have simply become obsolete. The results are historically valuable but no longer accurate. The conclusion of this essay may well be that Sigurd Buch Kristensen will turn

out to have been the harbinger of a new artistic conversion,[50] just as Friis and Larsen were the forerunners of Aalbæk Jensen and many others. Islands change perpetually and so does their description and, as a consequence, the ways readers and scholars engage with them, and Kristensen takes this elusive – 'floating' – position as the precondition for his work.

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50. I just would like to mention Tim Creswell's book *Maxwell Street. Writing and Thinking Place* (2019) as an example of an author (and a scholar) who continues to gather as much information as possible from a wide range of sources, in order to be able to construct a 'comprehensive' narrative of a particular place. In this case he is performing a kind of kaleidoscopic narrative 'excavation', producing a fascinating report that negotiates between various genres, traditions, and styles, and navigates between poetry, storytelling, and scholarly discourse, while at the same time challenging Goldsmith's notion of 'uncreative writing'.

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