

AN UNPUBLISHED LETTER BY BARTHOLD
GEORG NIEBUHR IN THE ROYAL LIBRARY

BY

E. BADIAN*

It is generally known that the later Roman historian Barthold Georg Niebuhr, the 150th anniversary of whose death fell in January 1981, was born in Copenhagen on 27 August 1776 and brought up by his father, the explorer Carsten Niebuhr, as a *Wunderkind* at Meldorf in Süderdithmarschen, at that time under the Danish Crown. Early in 1796, while a student at Kiel, he accepted an offer by Countess Charlotte Schimmelmann to become private secretary to her husband, the Minister of Finance Ernst Schimmelmann. Niebuhr arrived in Copenhagen to take up his duties in March 1796 and stayed there for two years, with occasional leaves of absence to visit Holstein. His work for Schimmelmann, who admired the young man and was very fond of him, did not last long; on 12 September 1796 A. P. Bernstorff, the senior minister at the time governing the country with the support and full confidence of the Crown Prince, informs D. G. Moldenhawer (whose appointment as Director of the Royal Library may justly be called a turning-point in its history) that he has given Niebuhr a supernumerary appointment in the Library, where Moldenhawer is to train him as a scholar-librarian like himself: Schimmelmann has agreed to this, and the Crown Prince can be confidently expected to confirm the arrangement. (Unpublished letter, Ny kgl. Sml. 2396, 4^o, no. 6.) By 20 September Niebuhr knew of it (Briefe p. 118).

Both the Schimmelmanns were very sorry to lose his services: Charlotte, to whom he had taken an instant and (as far as we can tell) unjustified dislike, is full of praise for him in her letters, from her first enthusiastic appraisal (1 May 1796 to Baggesen, Ny kgl. Sml. 2252, 4^o, IA2 no. 183: "... seine Seele ist gesund – sein Herz so rein u. gut. il a autant de *Coeur* que de *Tête*, c'est beauc. dire") to her reluctant acceptance of his move (EP p. 180, 29 September 1796: "Nous le perdons, mais

que faire? Il est destiné et prédestiné aux sciences. Son coeur est excellent ... il faut l'aimer"). For the moment he continued to live with the Schimmelmans, taking up his new duties, in fact, only in May 1797 (see below). Precisely what plans Bernstorff had for Niebuhr is not known: he had not made it clear even to Schimmelman, as appears from a letter written by the latter, just after Bernstorff's death, to reassure Niebuhr about his prospects (12 September 1797: Rigsarkivet, Schimmelmanske Papirer 32). What was envisaged was apparently a career combining scholarly pursuits with some appointment in the public service. To judge by his own letters at the time, that had been Niebuhr's own impression; and he was always firm about refusing any post that left him no time for study.

Part of the arrangement, at all events, had been a plan for Niebuhr to go on a *Studienreise* at an early stage: it is mentioned in Bernstorff's letter to Moldenhawer and is afterwards taken for granted. But arrangements for this did not work out smoothly. Other plans intervened; thus, at one time, a possibility of sending Niebuhr to Paris as Danish consul – an appointment that he very much wanted, but that in the end Schimmelman's patronage was not powerful enough to secure for him. (See Rigsarkivet, *ibid.*, 19 August 1797.) In return, however, the Crown Prince agreed to a grant from the fund *ad usus publicos*, to be used for an extensive journey to England and possibly France. Niebuhr, at this time, was in Holstein, courting Amalie Behrens, the sister of his friend Dore Hensler; he even played with the idea of giving up his prospects at Copenhagen (see below), but on hearing of the renewed and (now) concrete promise he returned to Copenhagen at Schimmelman's request, after making his engagement to Amalie formal (though not yet public).

During the next few months negotiations continued, both over the journey (made difficult by the disrupted state of the Danish Exchequer) and over Niebuhr's future, after his return from his travels and his marriage. It was only on 20 March that he mentioned the Crown Prince's approval of the final terms for his travel grant (Briefe no. 91–92). He was now given permission to return to Holstein to visit his parents, his fiancée and his friends, and he at once prepared to leave Copenhagen for Kiel.

Despite a fair number of surviving and partially published letters (in LN and Briefe) we know very little about his life in Copenhagen during the time of his work for the Royal Library. The published material does not even tell us where he lived. Proper publication of what is partially known would help a great deal. LN, apart from being unreliable, is sparing with biographical information, and the selection in Briefe seems

in part to have been deliberately made so as to avoid giving any. (See especially Briefe VI–VII for principles and cf. CXX–CXXI for attitudes.) But for the moment there is no real hope of adding to what we have, except from the resources of the Royal Library and Rigsarkivet. The interesting fact, however, is that what we do have is systematically misleading.

His period of residence in the Palais Schimmelmann, one of the social centres of Copenhagen, seems to have made him genuinely dislike social life, of which he always theoretically disapproved: both his own letters and Charlotte Schimmelmann's attest this. (She repeatedly describes him as misanthropic.) During the winter of 1797–98, however, he seems to have become more cheerful and sociable, perhaps because his future was now taking acceptable shape, but also because he met some people with whom he felt at ease. Charlotte Schimmelmann notes (EP p. 194: 15 December 1797) that "Niebuhr est moins misanthrope ce moment"; that he seems to enjoy the company of the friends he meets at her house, especially that of the very cultivated Portuguese minister Souza, of whom Niebuhr himself writes with great appreciation (e. g. LN pp. 116, 143 f.; cf. EP pp. 194 f.). His letters, in fact, mention affection and esteem for several men (Schimmelmann, Souza, the bandmaster Kunzen), but he insists – in what anyone familiar with his correspondence will recognise as his usual manner – on his dislike for society as a whole, his contempt for its triviality, his own preference for solitude and study. It is an obvious conjecture that he in fact had a liking for social life, but felt morally bound to repress it. Indeed, something of the sort appears, from time to time, in his letters written from Kiel during his days as a student there. As regards the period here treated, a few examples will give the idea.

LN p. 122 (30 December 1797, to Amalie): "Ich habe Dir schon gesagt, beste Amalie, dass mir der Weihnachtsabend in lebhaft froher Einsamkeit hingegangen ist." LN p. 112 (4 November 1797, to Amalie – just after his arrival): "Dein Andenken und Dein Bildniss verlässt mich . . . nicht. Darum fällt mir die Einsamkeit weniger, als je, schwer; darum bin ich in der Gesellschaft untheilnehmender, fremder, fehlgestellter als je."

LN p. 126 (2 January 1798, to his parents): "Ich habe diese Woche ziemlich viel Gesellschaft sehen *müssen*" [my italics]. (He mentions Schimmelmann, Kai Reventlow, Christian Bernstorff.)

Above all, perhaps, LN pp. 137 ff. (13 February 1798, to his parents): "Jetzt gehe ich zu diesem oder jenem *aus Rücksichten* [my italics], finde immer . . . eine starke Beimischung von Personen, mit denen man sich

in Acht nehmen muss . . . und bin, statt (wie?) ehemals eine Aufnahme und Einladung mit Dank aufzunehmen [it is not clear to which period of his life this is meant to refer], jetzt bedacht sie wegzuschieben . . . Man jagt durch seine Geschäfte, um sich auf Amusements – zu zerstreuen . . . und eine Gesellschaft giebt die ärmliche Nahrung der folgenden.”

Both occasional statements in the published letters and the short summaries by the editors of *Briefe* repeatedly refer to “depression” (e.g. p. 171 n. 2; 188 no. 88; LN pp. 78 f.). But the assessment by Charlotte Schimmelmann, quoted above, at this very time when he was stressing his unsociable nature, is in fact confirmed by occasional glimpses even in the published correspondence, where we have noted appreciative comments on various friends. It should be suggested that he was leading rather an active social life and constantly worried about enjoying it.

In this mood he frequently complains about Copenhagen as a whole, e.g. *Briefe* p. 179 (30 January 1798), one of the many references to his disliking the prospect of permanent employment there and preferring Kiel: “. . . das schläfrige, geistlose, unfreundliche [!] Kopenhagen . . .” Somewhat earlier, he must have written quite strongly about wanting to give up all prospects there and to live in Kiel instead. (Cf. *Briefe* pp. 140, 148.) Schimmelmann replies (Rigsarkivet, Schimm. Pap. 32, cit., 12 September 1797): “Sie wollen also gantz und ohne Anstand Copenhagen und die Bibliothek aufgeben; in Kiel glauben Sie Ruhe und Nahrung für Ihren Geist zu finden; . . . deutscher Sinn u. Sitte muss Sie anziehen.” (He goes on to remind him that there are advantages to living in a capital.) The absurdity of Niebuhr’s comments, even in the light of his experience as we have so far followed it, and at a time when cultural life in Copenhagen was particularly rich and varied, might be compared with what his friend Baggesen, a little earlier, had said (probably more justly) about Kiel, which Niebuhr was at that time just leaving: he notes the “luxury” that was the preoccupation of local society and comments on its “jämmerlich” university (H. Schulz, (ed.), *Timoleon und Immanuel. Dokumente einer Freundschaft* (1910) p. 353: 1 March 1796).

In the circumstances, it is not surprising that Niebuhr’s friends and associates who appear in the published correspondence are nearly all German: Baggesen appears to be the only Dane. (Souza, of course, was neither.) For Danes as a whole he at least once – in connection with an abortive scheme thought up by the Duke of Augustenburg for a Philological Seminar, intended to improve the educational system – records ludicrously exaggerated contempt (*Briefe* p. 176, no. 83: 23 January

1798): “Der elende Zustand der lateinischen Schulen in Dänemark [this appears to be true, in general], welcher zu der stupiden Unwissenheit der Studenten und *der Versunkenheit der ganzen Nation* nicht wenig beiträgt” [my italics].

It would appear that at this time Niebuhr can have known little about Danes and can have cared even less about the literary and musical life that graced the capital; perhaps, as was rumoured to be the case with Schimmelmann, he did not even know the language. Such a view might seem to be confirmed by a passage in one of his own letters to Amalie (whom, as we saw, he was trying to convince of his solitary life) – and that much later, when he was reporting negotiations over his future employment in the service of the Crown, after already spending some time in that service. On 18 April 1800 he writes (LN p. 266) that Schimmelmann and Christian Bernstorff are planning to set up a new Barbary Commission and want him to be its Secretary: they are worried only over whether he will be able to manage well enough with Danish. “Ich antwortete: in ein Paar Monaten. Wie bald lernte ich nicht Englisch schreiben.” The remark is authentic: even as late as this, he was putting Danish and English on the same level and implying that, at that stage, he still knew English better than Danish.

It is this background, universally accepted by *Niebuhrforschung* for lack of anything to correct it, that gives the letter here published its interest and, to the biographer of Niebuhr, its importance, despite – indeed, *because of* – its triviality of content. First, it shows Niebuhr moving familiarly in a circle of Danish friends, indeed in a Copenhagen club, of which he is eager to remain a member. It also shows him writing Danish with fluency and some charm, though clearly not with perfect ease, as the corrections and the extreme variations in spelling show. (Though we must remember that spelling was an art that he never perfectly mastered, according to contemporary rules, even in German.) Above all, it shows him turning to a Dane, whom he addresses with what we may call respectful familiarity, for trivial services, such as one would only impose on a friend. We know that there was, e.g., a club of Holsteiners in the royal service. (See J. G. Rist, *Lebenserinnerungen* 1² (1884) p. 140: “die sogenannte Sonntagsgesellschaft”.) Clearly, Niebuhr had nothing to do with it. The club he belonged to was Danish.

The letter, fully catalogued in the Royal Library, is not (as far as I know) cited or listed in any work on Niebuhr. It is an invaluable supplement and corrective to the account of his early life in Copenhagen that has

long been standard and that is based on the limited material in his published German correspondence. It poses various questions about Niebuhr's psychology; but those, except for a few indications, cannot be dealt with here. Let us, however, pinpoint his circle by looking at the men whose names appear in the letter.

Of the four men named (including the addressee, but excluding, of course, Hensler, who lived in Kiel), two are well known as being among his older associates: his superior Moldenhawer (see DBL² XVI pp. 13 ff.) and F. Münter (ibid. pp. 341 ff.). They need no detailed comment, and they are both Germans. The other two are Danes, and no association between one of them and Niebuhr has so far been known. Let us begin with the addressee, Rasmus Nyerup, at this time at the beginning of real prominence and clearly very well known to Niebuhr. Let us place him at the precise point of his distinguished career at which we here find him. (Cf. DBL² XVII pp. 284 ff.)

He was thirty-eight years old and in 1796 had competed against Jens Baggesen for the office of Provost of Regensen. The office was in the gift of the Duke of Augustenburg, who gave it to his special protégé Baggesen. We have a letter in which the Duke informs Baggesen of his appointment at 500 Rdl. per year. (See Timoleon und Immanuel, cit., p. 362: April 1796.) Nyerup was fobbed off with supervision of the Archive and the title of Professor, at 200 Rdl. The professorship, as we learn elsewhere, was an extraordinary professorship of the history of literature. (See C. L. Strøm (ed.), *Professor og Ridder Rasmus Nyerups Levnetsløb, beskrevet af ham selv* (1829) pp. 39 ff.) Since Baggesen was rarely in residence, Nyerup was officially made his Vicarius at Regensen in 1797. He remained bitter about the whole affair, and in his autobiography (cit.) tells us that, though he finally became Provost in 1802, he did not begin to draw the appropriate salary until 1814. In 1796–97 he had been one of the founders, in fact the chief organizer, of the Skandinaviske Litteraturselskab, of which (to mention only men associated with Niebuhr) Münter, Moldenhawer and Baggesen were also members from the start. In 1798 he was editor of a major journal, soon to become known (especially through the Collett case) for vigorous defence of freedom of the press. It was most probably through Niebuhr's personal friend Baggesen that he came to know Nyerup well. But they were in fact colleagues in the Royal Library, where Nyerup continued to hold a post as a librarian. He is occasionally mentioned as such in unpublished letters by Niebuhr in the Niebuhr-Nachlass at the Archiv of the Akademie der Wissenschaften der DDR in Berlin, which I was courteously allowed to read and excerpt last summer.

But Niebuhr never mentions him as a close associate – indeed, he frequently stresses his deliberate isolation from the other librarians, of whose attitude to their work he disapproves. Here as elsewhere, his Danish personal contacts seem to be deliberately concealed.

The connection is also attested in other letters. In a letter to Baggesen of 15 April 1797 (Add. 16–17, 2^o) Nyerup tells Baggesen that he has been unable to deliver a message to Niebuhr, who happened not to be in the Library. (For the message see S. Birket Smith (ed.), *Til Belysning af literære Personer og Forhold* (1884) p. 259, Baggesen to Nyerup: 11 April 1797.) And – most intriguing of all – on 8 June 1797 Baggesen asks Nyerup: “Logerer Niebuhr hos dig?” (Birket Smith p. 264.) Alas, there is at present no answer to this. LN p. 76 in fact tells us that about this time (about May 1797) Niebuhr at last left the Schimmelmann household and “rented a few rooms in town” (“miethete sich einige Zimmer in der Stadt”). Nyerup is not mentioned, in this connection or indeed in any other. But we see that their mutual friend Baggesen at least thought it *likely* that Niebuhr would move (presumably) into Regensen. It must therefore have been discussed among them before. It would be interesting to know whether he in fact did, at least for a time; as it would be to know where he lived after his return to Copenhagen, in the winter of 1797–98. But at present these questions remain unanswerable. Certainly, some such domestic connection would make it more intelligible that it was Nyerup to whom Niebuhr turned for help with trivial personal arrangements.

We might here add that, not at all long after taking up his permanent appointment in Copenhagen, Niebuhr was himself elected to the *Litertaturselskab* – another fact unknown to his biographers. His name first appears in its surviving lists (Add. 281, 2^o) when he reports that he cannot attend the session of 29 May 1802, as he is going abroad. His name is not on the last surviving list before that one, no. 26 of 26 December 1801. Either in that session or early in 1802 he must therefore have been elected to membership. By then, his commitment to Danish culture was clearly regarded as firm and serious. The letter here published helps us glimpse its origins.

The other Danish friend recorded in the letter can be more briefly annotated. “Benzon” is in fact clearly A. B. (“Benoni”) Bentzon (DBL³ I pp. 575 ff.), at that time a young man prominent in literary circles, though he later opted for an administrative career. On him, around this stage of his life, when he was an Adjunct to the Law Faculty and making his living as a tutor, we have the fascinating description by J. G. Rist, *Lebensrin-*

nerungen, cit., pp. 126 ff., stressing his physical deformity and its psychological effects, as well as his outstanding mind and culture. (An example of his aggressive wit in K. Bokkenheuser, *Drejers Klub* (1903) pp. 210; more generally, 252 f.) No connection between him and Niebuhr is known outside this letter; yet the letter suggests a close one at the time.

Finally, as we have noted, we discover Niebuhr a member of one of Copenhagen's Danish clubs and eager not to forfeit his membership through an oversight. Which club is this? Certainty is unattainable, and this was an age when a rich club life was characteristic of the city. (See, e.g., Bokkenheuser, cit., and, for an interesting detailed description, Carl Bruun's still fascinating book *Kjøbenhavn*, III (1901) pp. 641 ff.) But we know that Nyerup was a member of the same club, and we are entitled to assume that the other men mentioned in the letter also were, since they are picked out for a mention, Nyerup is clearly expected to see them quite frequently, and the Club has just been referred to in detail. It may be suggested that it is *Drejers Klub*, the first and senior of them all. I have found no complete list of members or other archival material on it: information from readers would be welcome. But some members are mentioned in Bokkenheuser's old study. F. Münter was apparently one (though this is not quite certain: see p. 29). As for Moldenhawer, his membership may be considered certain, since envelopes addressed to him "chez M. Drejer" are preserved among his correspondence in the Royal Library. Nyerup (p. 136: spelled "Nyrup", but the fact that he appears in Rahbek's circle makes the identification certain) and Bentzon (see above: he was quite conspicuous) are attested as members by Bokkenheuser. We may therefore conclude with a good deal of confidence that as early as March 1798 the young Niebuhr had been elected to membership of the foremost club in Copenhagen (known i. a. for its enormous punch bowl) – a club which H. Steffens ranked as an immensely powerful institution, practically dominating Denmark, and one to which it was "necessary" to belong (see the illuminating pages of *Was ich erlebte* extracted by Bokkenheuser, pp. 214 ff.). In the light of what we know, it is less surprising, however, than it would appear on the facts hitherto known. In any case, Jens Baggesen, whose close friendship with Niebuhr (at this very time) had long been known and is amply attested, was one of the more contentious members (see Bokkenheuser, *passim*): it is very likely that it was he who introduced Niebuhr.

It is indeed fortunate that this short and, on the surface, trivial letter, happens to be preserved; for it is a precious document illuminating Niebuhr's early years of residence in Copenhagen.**

The Royal Library, Add. 16-17, 2°

Korsøer, 31 Mart. 98

Endnu i Siælland, kiære Hr. Professor, er jeg foranlediget at benytte mig og paaminde dem af deres venlige Løfte. den Iil og Forvirring som hindrede mig at udrette selv mange Anliggenheder jeg skulde fuldende i de sidste dage, har ligeledes været Skyld til at jeg glemte at bede dem om flere Tienester some jeg kunde være overbeviist om de vilde ikke nægte mig. Tilgiver derfor, kiære Hr. Professor, at jeg falder den til Byrde enddog i Fraværelsen.

Jeg glemte at efterlade en Adresse for min store Koffre som jeg ønskede at faae afsendt til Holsteen. Der staaer Bogstaver paa samme, som kan enddog denne gang tiene til Mærke; de ere tydelig skreven, og udtrykker mit Navn. Maatte jeg bede dem at skrive paa et forseglet Couvert min sædvanlig[e] Adresse, med Koffrens Mærke; og hosføyet: at Addressen afleveres hos Livmedicus Hensler i Kiel? Jeg tilføyer endnu den Ønske at faae mit Tøy med første Paketbaad om muelig. Fragten, som de maaskee maatte udlægge i Kiøbh. naar Skipperen ikke lod sig nøye med Løfte at faae den betalt i Kiel, skal jeg tilbage betale dem med sand Taknemmelighed

Jeg glemte ligeledes at melde mig i Klubben som bortreisende: omendskiønt jeg forsømte den i Vinteren, saa vilde (det) gjøre mig ondt at fratræde aldeles; men engang optagne Medlemmer har den Frighed at komme tilbage efter egen Ønske under visse Betingelsers Opfyldelse; ikke saa? Da de, kiære Hr. Professor, besøger Clubben paa Postdagene, saa kunde de maaskee have den Godhed at udrette det som jeg selv burde gjøre.

Vi ligge[r] for Belten med conträr Vind; desuagtet indskibe Vi os i en halv Times Tiid. Reisen vil neppe vedblive saa beqvem som den begyndte. Men vi ere friske, og kiendte de ventende Besværligheder førend vi paatoge Landrejsen i denne ublide Aarstid.

Foruden Münter og Moldenhawer som de maaskee allerede har hilst, jeg glemte at give dem samme Commission til Benzon, som de maae bede icke at forglemme mig til jeg kommer tilbage til Kiøbenhavn.

Med uforanderlig Høiyagtelse

BG Niebuhr

(Address:)

Til Hr. Professor Nyerup
fr. Kiøbenhavn

NOTES

* I should like to thank the staff of the Royal Library and Rigsarkivet for their unfailing help and courtesy; the Harvard Graduate Society for Advanced Study and Research for a contribution towards my visit to Copenhagen, of which this is a first result; and the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, where I had the leisure to put it together, during a term as a Visiting Member in the Fall of 1980.

The following abbreviations are used:

Briefe = D. Gerhard and W. Norvin (edd.), *Die Briefe Barthold Georg Niebuhrs I* (1926)

DBL² = P. Engelstoft and Sv. Dahl (edd.), *Dansk Biografisk Leksikon*, 27 vols (1933–1944)

DBL³ = Sv. Cedergreen Bech (ed.), *Dansk Biografisk Leksikon*, 3rd edition (1979–)

EP = L. Bobé (ed.), *Efterladte Papirer fra den Reventlowske Familiekreds i Tidsrummet 1770–1827 IV* (1900)

LN = *Lebensnachrichten über Barthold Georg Niebuhr I* (1838)

It is well known among specialists that quotations from letters in LN should not necessarily be regarded as being Niebuhr's own words and may even be considerably distorted. They will be used here, as they are elsewhere, subject to this warning, where there is nothing more authentic.

** I should like to thank my friend Dr. Jørgen Mejer, of the Classics Department of the University of Copenhagen, for help in the transcription of the letter, and for constant encouragement of my passion for the history of Copenhagen in the late 18th century; Dr. Dieter Lohmeier, of the Germanistische Seminar, University of Kiel, for various suggestions that turned out worth following up; and the editor of this journal for painstakingly checking and correcting the transcription and helping to make it typographically possible.

The letter is, in principle, transcribed just as (to my own eyes and those of the others mentioned) it appears to be written. The spelling, including inconsistencies and errors, has been left unaltered. Square brackets [.] are used to mark deletions by the author, pointed brackets ⟨. . .⟩ to mark an addition by the author, inserted above the line in the original. Underlining is the author's. Since no attempt is made to distinguish capital from lower-case d, except in a single place in paragraph 3, I have written lower-case d throughout. The double-s symbol is throughout rendered as ss.