
Conference Report: Danish Romanticism Takes to the Hills

Edge Hill University, UK, 29 April 2017

On 29 April 2017, three members of the NARS board – Cian Duffy (Lund), Lis Møller (Aarhus), and Robert Rix (Copenhagen) – presented aspects of their research on romanticism and Denmark to the ‘Romanticism Takes to the Hills’ conference at Edge Hill University in Ormskirk, a town in the northwest of England which can trace its Nordic heritage back to Viking times. The conference explored the relationship between place, space, and identity in the so-called ‘Long Romantic Period’ (c. 1750–1850), paying particular attention to literatures rooted in specific topographies, and comprising a range of historical and theoretical approaches, including some of the state-of-the-art mapping technologies deployed by scholars working in digital humanities.

Duffy, Møller, and Rix convened a panel at the conference entitled ‘Placing Romanticism in Denmark’. The panel investigated both the importance of place in Danish romanticism and the place of Denmark in British romanticism. When romantic nationalism began to develop in Denmark in the early nineteenth century, Danish artists, writers, and intellectuals began to look increasingly towards Danish historical places for sources of inspiration. Meanwhile, fractures in the political relationship between Britain and Denmark during the Napoleonic Wars meant that the place of Denmark in the British cultural imagination began simultaneously to be transformed. The panel reflected on some key moments in these changes.

First to speak was Cian Duffy, from Lund University. His paper, entitled “‘The Meteors of war’: Placing Copenhagen in Napoleonic Europe, 1801–1807”, took as its focus some romantic-period literary responses to the two British naval assaults on Copenhagen in April 1801 and September 1807. Duffy’s paper traced, in those responses, the tension between a ‘romantic’ tendency to imagine and to represent Copenhagen in specific ways and the geopolitical reality of the city and its place on the complex map of Napoleonic Europe. In particular, Duffy discussed the tendency of some British romantic-period writing to represent Copenhagen as an altogether more northerly city than it actually is, and the

attempt to use the city as the focal point for an image of shared 'northern' identity which could be motivated as a cultural and political foil to the Napoleonic 'south'.

Second up was Robert Rix, from Copenhagen University, whose paper, entitled 'Danish Travellers Discovering Denmark in the Age of Romantic Nationalism', focused on the various ideologies driving domestic travel by Danes during the 'Golden Age'. The first substantial Danish travel account to be published was the romantic-period writer Jens Baggesen's *The Labyrinth; or, Journey through Germany, Switzerland and France* (1792–1793). Baggesen, as Rix noted, advises his reader to 'always travel south as far as you can', out of and away from Denmark. As Rix's paper made clear, however, the beginning of the nineteenth century saw a number of influential Danish writers turn their attention to domestic travels around rural Denmark, substituting for the wonders of the Grand Tour the megalithic monuments from Denmark's Nordic past. Rix showed how these domestic travellers promoted a textualized landscape, in which monuments, primarily prehistoric dolmens, are reinvested with new significance, in order to construct a new sense of Danish national and cultural identity. However, the means by which this cultural nation-building was effected – through the registers of romantic nationalism, of the sublime, and even of paganism – was not, as Rix showed, without its controversies. Central characters of the Danish cultural elite clashed in public over the degree, to which travel narratives should contain a measure of pseudo-pagan 'enthusiasm' in order to convey the magnificence of the ancient dolmens to the modern reader. Even though this debate was not then resolved, both sides of the fence showed awareness of the fact that travel narratives were important vehicles for defining cultural capital.

Lis Møller, from Aarhus University, brought the Nordic contribution to a close with her paper, entitled 'The Elfin Hill: An Imaginary Topography in Danish Romanticism'. Møller's paper focused on two case histories to illustrate the ways in which Danish antiquarians and poets of the early nineteenth century sought to recover and (re)construct the vernacular heritage of the middle ages. Møller took as her subject two Danish ballads which held a particular fascination for the romantic imagination: *Elverhøj* [Elf Hill] and 'Elverskud' [Elf shot], both of which deal with the elfin hill as a site of demonic and fatal eroticism. Major Danish romantic poets adapted these ballads; they were translated into German (by Gottfried Herder) and English (by Robert Jamieson), and subsequently adapted by Goethe, Matthew 'Monk' Lewis, and possibly even John Keats. The nineteenth-century, Danish ballad scholar Svend Grundtvig fully acknowledged the transnational character of these Danish elf ballads, finding counterparts to 'Elverskud', for instance, in Swedish, Norwegian, Faroese, Icelandic, Scottish, Bohemian, German, French, Italian, and Brittonic balladry. And yet, as Møller argued in her paper, the imaginary topography of the elfin hill was routinely interpreted by Danish romantics as a site of specific *national* identity. Her paper

examined in detail this romantic nationalist appropriation of the elfin hill, as well as the tensions between the national and the transnational in the Danish romantic ballad revival, taking as her point of entry the use of the topos in Johan Ludvig Heiberg's vaudeville *Elverhøj* (1828, *Elves' Hill*), which was, until recently, considered the Danish national play, and Niels W. Gade's ballad opera *Elverskud* (1858, *Elf-King's Daughter*).

All three papers – each of which was generously illustrated from contemporary visual sources – were taken from works-in-progress on larger projects by the three presenters. Collectively, they served to introduce delegates at the conference to aspects of Danish romanticism with which they were, for the most part, unfamiliar. The papers were very well-received and the panel concluded with lively questions and discussion. The panel also provided Duffy, Møller, and Rix with the opportunity, which was elegantly taken by Rix, to introduce delegates to the work of the Nordic Association for Romantic Studies and to *Romantik*. The possibility was also discussed of further collaboration between romanticists at Edge Hill and the home universities of the three speakers.

(All translations into English are by the reviewer.)

Cian Duffy
Lund University