

# THIS TIME AS ROMANTIC FICTION

## *Monarchism and Peasant Freedom in the Historical Literature of B. S. Ingemann 1824-1836*

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[ABSTRACT]

This article examines the relationship between the monarchy and the people as represented by one of the foremost Danish Romantics, the poet B. S. Ingemann (1789-1862), in the historical literature he published between 1824 and 1836. It argues that what was slowly becoming a master narrative in the years when Ingemann wrote his Danish history, the so-called 'myth of an original peasant's freedom', is also inherent in Ingemann's novels and poems. Drawing on the literature of the Danish historian Peter Frederik Suhm, Ingemann embraces and 'recycles' the idea that historically an ancient constitution existed in Denmark to ensure that the peasant was on equal political terms with the nobility and the clergy. No decision could be made without the consent of the commonality. The article stresses that this idea has had an enormous impact on Danish society, both as a cultural indicator and as an actual political tool, not least in the crucial years following the French Revolution.

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### Denmark 1796

En Dag saae han en Marionet-Farce, der blev spillet af nogle omreisende Gjøglerne i en Bondeggaard. Der blev snakket en hel Del med grove og pibende Stemmer, som han ikke forstod – der var megen Tummel og Skrigen. Endelig blev der opreist et Stillads med en lille Træmaskine paa Bræderne, og under Larm af Trommer, Piber og Skrig blev der hugget Hovedet af to kronede Trædukker. Det var Tidsalderens største Tragødie, der her var bleven til en Leg for Børn og Almuesfolk, som loe og morede sig derover ret lystigt. At det dog har gjort et andet Indtryk paa den lille forbausede Tilskuer fra Præstegaarden, og at han forud maatte have opfattet nogle Forestillinger om de Rædselsbilleder, man her legede med, synes klart, medens han endnu over 60 Aar derefter ikke har forglemt den uhyggelige Klang af hine kronede Trædukkkehoveders Rullen paa Fjællebodbræderne.<sup>1</sup> (Ingemann, *Levnetsbog I-II* 91)

This childhood memory is recounted in the memoirs of the popular Danish writer and poet Bernhard Severin Ingemann (1789-1862). The anecdote took place on

a peasant farm on the rural island of Falster in the south of Denmark. On this farm, only a few years after the actual historical event yet geographically remote from its original location, the French Revolution had been re-enacted. A theatre group had arrived at a small, sleepy village somewhere on the cold, Nordic periphery of the European continent. In this spot, transformed into the Place de la Révolution, actors had portrayed the cruel fate of Louis XVI (1754-1793) and his queen, Marie Antoinette (1755-1793). These events were among the most significant of the French Revolution: the imperious King and his Queen, sentenced to death by their own people during those momentous days of January and October 1793. On that day in Denmark in 1796, the young Ingemann, only seven or eight years old, vividly experienced those powerful events which apparently gave him what Stephen Greenblatt calls ‘a touch of the real’ (21).

Evidently, neither this kind of historical event nor its re-enactment pleased the young Ingemann. The description of how, as an adult, he would still recall with a shiver the ugly noise of the wooden puppet heads rolling on the stage perfectly demonstrates his strong dislike of the gory outcome of the French Revolution, be it as a historical event, a theatrical play or a vivid childhood memory.

The French Revolution was, as the English poet P. B. Shelley would later put it, ‘the master theme in the epoch in which we live’ (504) and had a stupendous impact all across Europe. Significantly, Ingemann opens his earliest life story by placing his very personal experience within this context (Ingemann, *Levnetsbog I-II* 329). From his later account, we learn that every Friday people would gather to hear the news from France as the postman delivered the latest newspapers from Copenhagen (Ingemann, *Levnetsbog I-II* 90). From Paris to as far as the Danish island of Falster, the famous battle song La Marseillaise was sung. Having evolved into a lively and entertaining ditty, it was well-suited for festive occasions around Danish dinner tables (Ingemann, *Levnetsbog I-II* 106). Ingemann compares it to songs written by the Danish composer Thomas Thaarup (1749-1821) and concludes that these songs also capture the idea of freedom and humanity, but unlike their French counterpart, they do so only in a peaceful manner (Ingemann, *Levnetsbog I-II* 92). Ingemann believed that what happened in France was a violent tragedy, whereas the liberation of the Danish people had been achieved by peaceful means (107). He was a reformist, not a revolutionary. If the French Revolution was a rough and bloody model for democracy, Ingemann was convinced that its Danish counterpart avoided the mistakes made by the French by carefully considering its pitfalls. This has become a dominant idea in Danish historiography, where it is commonly held that the Danish monarchy managed to restore itself in the aftermath of the French Revolution by apparently absorbing and implementing the Enlightenment in its own (Nordic) way (Sørensen and Stråht 7). In short, the understanding is that between 1788 and 1814, the Danish Kingdom underwent several reforms reminiscent of those introduced during the French Revolution, albeit in a nonviolent and peaceful manner and under monarchical rule: ‘In many respects this Northern European monarchy personified the ideals of the Enlightenment thinkers’ (Østergaard 28). Whether the King was aware that the political system needed reformation, or whether he simply had no choice but

to accept the reforms remains an open question. It seems, however, that the Danish absolutist monarchy was sensitive to public opinion. In historiography, this is what is characterized as ‘opinion based absolutism’ (Seip).

The abovementioned childhood anecdote exemplifies the general perception of the French Revolution central to Danish historiographical thought. Its location – a farm – becomes an almost iconic setting due to the myth of the so-called ‘original peasants’ freedom’, which was slowly becoming the standard narrative in the years when Ingemann produced his voluminous tomes on Danish history.<sup>2</sup> The reading of Ingemann’s works presented in this paper is inspired by the hermeneutic practice known as New Historicism.<sup>3</sup>

### **The Historical Literature of B. S. Ingemann**

B. S. Ingemann’s historical writings about medieval Denmark and its kings were published between 1824 and 1836. They comprise the poem *Valdemar den Store og hans Mænd* (1824) [Waldemar the Great and his Men], the historical novels *Valdemar Seier* (1826) [Waldemar, surnamed Seir, or the Victorious], *Erik Menveds Barndom* (1828) [The Childhood of Erik Menved], *Kong Erik og de Fredløse* (1833) [King Eric and the Outlaws], *Prinds Otto af Danmark og hans Samtid* (1835) [Prince Otto of Denmark and his Time], and finally the poem *Dronning Margrete* (1836) [Queen Margaret I].<sup>4</sup> These pieces were not immediately translated; in some cases, more than ten years elapsed between their original publication in Danish and their translation into another language. In most cases Ingemann read and approved the foreign translations, often engaging in enthusiastic letter exchanges with the translator. It therefore makes good sense to use these later translations, primarily because of their authenticity. Only the first poem in the history, *Valdemar den Store og hans Mænd*, was never translated into another European language, although passages from the poem appeared in English review magazines during the first half of the 19th century (Black, Young and Young; Cocrane; Milligan).

Traditionally, Ingemann’s historical prose pieces have been considered naive and simple, their loyalty to the Danish monarchy old-fashioned. For generations, it has been commonplace to ridicule them as substandard popular literature and poor historical writing, ever since the contemporary critic and historian Christian Molbech (1783-1857) laid the ground for a negative reception of them when they were first published (cf. Molbech, ‘Bidrag’, ‘Kritiske’ 260, ‘Erik’). At the time when Ingemann was creating his historical fictions, history was slowly becoming a professional and scientific subject in Denmark. One of the architects of this development was none other than Molbech himself, who established himself as an authoritative expert on the new historical science by founding the *Danish Historical Journal* in 1839 (cf. Molbech, ‘Om Historiens’). Molbech pursued a persistent line of criticism against Ingemann’s pieces, dedicating almost fifty pages to a thorough, almost meticulous critique of the author’s first Danish historical novel, *Valdemar Seir*. Several other literary and historical magazines refused to print his review, suggesting that even his contemporaries considered his judgement to be harsh.

Later, another influential literary critic, Georg Brandes, re-visited and elaborated on Molbech's critique. As the towering figure of the so-called moderne gennembrud [Modern Breakthrough] of Scandinavian literature, Brandes denounced Danish Romanticism, with which Ingemann's name was synonymous.<sup>5</sup> According to Brandes, Danish Romanticism had created an unrealistic, exaggerated form of national self-esteem. This nationalism was introverted, closed off from the main currents of European intellectual life, and, Brandes claimed, it had lost touch with the real world. Ingemann's pieces were considered not to deserve the name of literature nor of historiography. After Brandes' onslaught, critics would shun Ingemann's historical literature for nearly forty years until 1922, when the scholar Kjeld Galster (1885-1960) published a book on Ingemann's historical novels, continuing Brandes' line of criticism (cf. Galster).

So far, Ingemann's historical pieces have been read without contextualization in a wider societal and political framework; but in the context of (1) the history of mentalities and (2) the cultural history of Denmark in the Restoration period, they are useful resources with which common patterns of ideology and intellectual thought can be reconstructed – as is proposed here. They will, in the following, be read as Romantic, historiographical fictions. Ingemann's works contain a full-blown synthesis of Danish medieval history calibrated so that it mirrored his own age.

Ingemann conceived his historical works as literary pieces that 'form a series of historical delineations' directly related to each other.<sup>6</sup> Moving from a time of prosperity turning to decline, then prosperity again, the pieces follow a cyclic notion of time and represent the longest coherent literary work on Nordic history. They cover a large part of Danish, and to some extent Nordic medieval history and would amount to over 3,000 'standard pages' today. The work describes approximately 250 years of history, from the wars shortly before the reign of Valdemar the Great (1131-1181) in 1150 up to the political union of the three Nordic countries (Denmark, Sweden and Norway) that was created in the Swedish city of Calmar in 1397 under the rule of Queen Margaret I (1353-1412). On reading the pieces, there can be no doubt that Ingemann was in favour of the Danish monarchy. The fact that each piece is devoted to monarchs of ancient Denmark earned them the nickname 'Kongebøgerne' [The Books of Kings].

Each piece includes detailed descriptions of characters as well as events. To a certain extent, all the characters in Ingemann's pieces are historical ones: the character of Lady Helena in *Valdemar Seir* (1826) is known only from an old medieval song, though more is known about King Waldemar himself. More than 120 historical figures are introduced in this novel alone – a considerable character gallery. The composition of the cycle is unique in that it creates a distinctive universe by combining sources from archaeology, history, literature, law, folksong, legends, myths and Greek tragedy. It takes a well-informed reader to notice all the references to classic literature. Besides the representatives of royalty, we also find members of the commonality in characters such as the orphan Carl of Riise, Morten the Cook, Dorothy Brushbom, Henner the Frisian and the peasant Ole Stam. These are all popular protagonists of the narratives and they are often

given more narrative space than the monarchs, their patriotic and monarchist deeds every bit as important, if not more so. Using the form of fiction to communicate cultural nationalism (Leerssen 13ff), Ingemann merges ancient myth and vivid descriptions of heroic acts. One example can be found in the story of Carl of Riise, who goes crusading with Waldemar the Victorious (1170-1241). During the battle at Lyndanisse in the year 1219, he grasps the Danish banner, the Dannebrog, as it falls from the sky:

‘The Sign! The Sign! Salvation from Heaven,’ he shouted, and sprang up, half frantic with joy. The banner descended on the summit of the hill; he ran and seized it; then waved it over his head with triumphant enthusiasm. The sun shone full on the white cross; and the tall form of Carl of Riise, in his well-known armour, was instantly recognised by the Danish host. The helmet had fallen from his head – His long, golden locks flowed in the breeze, and, as he thus stood, he resembled the picture of the Archangel Michael, as he is sometimes represented, with the banner of victory in his hands, and the vanquished Demons under his feet. (Ingemann, *Waldemar Surnamed Seier* [Chapman, 1841 108])

The Archangel Michael is one of the only Biblical figures mentioned in Ingemann’s writings. He is a part not only of Christian, but also of Jewish and Islamic traditions. Michael is the field commander of the Army of God, whereas Carl is in the army of the Danish King serving the Danish monarchy. By likening Carl to the Archangel, Ingemann insists on a special connection between religion (Christianity), nation (Denmark), the people (the Danes) and the monarch (the Danish King). At the same time, Carl is described as an ordinary boy with friends and sweet dreams of Rigmor, the maiden he will eventually marry. G. W. F. Hegel speaks of this as a ‘necessary anachronism’ with regard to the identification processes of ordinary people (277-279). In other words, the manner in which fictitious characters speak and express their feelings, ideas and accomplishments can illuminate the foreign (the past) in the known (the present).

Traditionally, Ingemann’s prose pieces are defined as belonging to the genre of the historical novel, but Ingemann himself thought of them as historical romances, i.e. pieces about the North’s glorious past. He considered himself part of a long line of great ancient poets (Ingemann, *Prinds Otto* xii). Furthermore, he compared his works to the sagas and ‘people’s chronicles’ [almue krøniker], thereby indicating the relationship between common people and Danish history as exemplified in the character of Carl. Ingemann undoubtedly pursued a well-planned programme when writing his Danish history, which it would take him fourteen years to finish (Vogelius 52). With the dawn of popular culture in post-revolutionary Europe, Ingemann was instrumental in making a certain ideology the defining basis upon which the Danish state was built and conceptualized. As the Danish historian Jens Chr. Manniche has remarked, the fate of Denmark is connected to a special alliance between the King and the people; a historical interpretation of Denmark as a nation; and the Danes as a people. This unique connection dominated the bourgeois historical consciousness in Denmark in the period from 1807 to 1849 (Manniche 261).

Following the French Revolution and the revolutionary wars from 1791 onwards, the Kingdom of Denmark was deeply and helplessly involved in the complicated re-negotiations of inner European boundaries. When diplomacy failed, Copenhagen was attacked by the British fleet in 1801 at Slaget på Rheden [The Battle of Copenhagen]. A few years later, in 1807, a catastrophic attack known as the Bombardment of Copenhagen, also mounted by the British forces, severely damaged the Danish capital (Due-Nielsen and Feldbæk). As a consequence of the Napoleonic wars, Denmark had to give up Norway at the peace negotiations in Kiel in 1814, and when an agricultural crisis bankrupted the State that same year, the former Danish empire was left vulnerable and fragile on the Northern fringe of the European continent.

Ingemann's historical literature shares with poets such as Walter Scott, Alessandro Manzoni and Alexandre Dumas specific didactic purposes amalgamating common patterns of European experiences in the early 19th century. In the wake of the Napoleonic wars and the redrawing of Europe's boundaries, there was a general tendency in European Romantic historiography to identify a glorious, long bygone golden age of the nation and the fatherland: an age of heroism and virtue useful in turbulent times. By looking back to ancient times, historians, poets and novelists found both inspiration and comfort, which helped them to deal with current history. Thus, historical experiences cultivated and encouraged national Romantic movements and forged cultural nationalism all across Europe. Ingemann's historical literature is a response to historical catastrophes as seen from a Danish perspective. The opening lines of his first poem *Waldemar the Great and his Men* (1824) sets the scene for his didactic history class:

'Tis Epiphany Night, and echoes a sound  
In Haraldsted Wood from the hard frozen ground.  
Loud snort three steeds in the wintry blast –  
While under their hoof-dint the snow crackles fast.  
On his neighing charger, with shield and sword,  
Is mounted a valiant and lofty lord;  
A clerk and a squire his steps attend,  
And their course towards Roskild the travellers bend:  
But distant is Denmark's morning!  
(Ingemann, *Waldemar the Great and his Men* [Cocrane 134])

Archbishop Absalon Hvide (1128-1201) is on his way back from Paris, accompanied by the historian Saxo Grammaticus (1160-1208) and the old poet and Squire Arnold, who is not a historical figure but an invention of Ingemann's. Arnold is neither learned nor a great warrior, but he represents the people and has an inner wisdom and a great faculty of judgement. Hvide is said to have founded Copenhagen in c. 1160. In the poem, he is riding with his friends towards Roskilde to save Denmark having received news that the country is under threat. One of the oldest chroniclers of Danish history, Saxo Grammaticus is the source of much ancient Danish history. His *Gesta Danorum* documents a very ancient part

of Denmark's history,<sup>7</sup> which proved crucial in the 19th century when antiquity legitimized nationhood. Saxo's deep affiliation with the past is made clearly noticeable: '[H]e seemed as though he saw and held converse with the great spirits of former ages, and as if he himself belonged to another world and to another time' (Ingemann, *Waldemar surnamed Seier* [Chapman, 1841 4]). Ingemann describes the *Gesta Danorum* as an important and precious gift bestowed upon the Danish people. On his deathbed, Saxo speaks the following words:

'but, ere I can rest in peace,' he continued, as he exerted himself to reach the heavy package of books to the Bishop, 'I must deposit in thine hands my legacy to Denmark's people and their king: I mean my Danish History.' (Ingemann, *Waldemar surnamed Seier* [Chapman, 1841 61])

Saxo is not only a person of flesh and blood whom Ingemann made a great effort to portray well, but he was also one of the authorities from which Ingemann drew his knowledge. In the Danish foreword to his last historical novel, *Prince Otto and his Time* (1836), he furthermore names Arild Huitfeldt (1546-1609) and Peter Frederik Suhm (1728-1798) as his main sources.

In this paper, I shall focus on the historian Peter Frederik Suhm, as Ingemann's 19th-century history writing drew heavily on his histories. I will illustrate how, by inscribing his literature in a common Danish historiographic narrative, Ingemann contributed to the establishment of Danish identity in the 19th century. The key issue in this context is the relationship between the king and his people.

### **Historiography in the Time of Ingemann**

Peter Frederik Suhm was a prominent man in Copenhagen in the closing decades of the 18th century. He was well educated and enormously prolific as a history writer. When Ingemann wrote his Danish history, Suhm was already considered the greatest historian of his time. In particular, his sixteen-volume work *History of Denmark*, written between 1788 and 1799, made him a common reference point in academic circles. He maintained his position as the country's leading historian until the national liberal historian Carl Ferdinand Allen published his *Handbook in Danish History* in 1839. Suhm, who was very liberal for his time, was in favour of the abolishment of censorship, which became official policy in 1770 under the de facto reign of the German Johan Friedrich Struensee (1737-1772). Officially, Struensee was personal physician to King Christian VII (1749-1808), who suffered from the effects of mistreatment and severe mental illness (Lange). Struensee took advantage of the situation by gradually usurping the King's power until he could assume the position of Cabinet Minister. As a man of the Enlightenment, Struensee was progressive and tried to reform several important issues in Danish society, such as freedom of the press (Laursen, 'Spinoza' and 'David Hume'). Eventually, he lost favour with the Danish people, and the court turned its back on him. On 16 January 1772 he was arrested for treason, specifically for planning

a counter coup from within the court. Ironically, the abolishment of censorship had contributed to the public opinion turning against him. On top of everything, Struensee had an affair with the Danish Queen Caroline Mathilde (1751-1775). After a brief trial, he was tortured and executed in Copenhagen on 28 April 1772 in an especially barbaric and cruel manner (he was put on the wheel and the rack). Counterfactually speaking, if Struensee's tour de force in Danish political society had been successful, Denmark would have become one of the most progressive states in Europe.<sup>8</sup> However, matters more or less returned to the former status quo and among other things, censorship was re-established.

Suhm, decidedly in the minority within the Danish Court, responded positively to Struensee's progressive ideas. He was well aware of the crisis the Danish monarchy was facing. In a famous letter 'To the King' [Brev til kongen] (Suhm, vol. 16: 3), handed to the new Prime Minister Ove Høgh Guldberg (1731-1808) on the morning after the coup d'état against Struensee, Suhm urged Guldberg to introduce a new law ensuring the enhancement of the people's civic rights. The letter subsequently made Suhm known all over intellectual Europe and earned the King a congratulatory missive from the ageing Voltaire. Suhm's proposal was, in fact, a re-draft of constitutional law, since it endorsed a limited monarchy. Although the proposal was rejected, Suhm revised the idea of an original peasants' freedom into a new and updated version, which would soon enter the canon of Danish history.

Suhm believed that in heathen and mythical times, an ancient constitution allowed peasants to elect and legitimize the monarchs alongside the nobility and other high-ranking people. In fact, no decision could be made without the consent of the commonality. The peasant was on an equal political footing and could own property; he was a free man. This idea of peasant freedom was based upon civil liberties such as freedom of speech and the rights to vote, to due process and to ownership of property. Most importantly, there existed a special bond between king and subjects, since in ancient times the king used to live among hunters and warriors himself as a member of the commonality which, for organizational purposes, needed to choose a leader. The legal function of this ancient society was carried out at a thing-stead. This term derives from the Old Norse word þing, meaning 'assembly' or 'meeting'. Later, the word came to denote the act, deed, or matter discussed at the 'thing-stead', namely the thing in question. Its modern-day Danish form 'ting' is also preserved in the names of the Danish, Icelandic and Norwegian parliaments (folketinget, altinget and landstinget, respectively). The thing-stead has always been defined as a political and legal space where in ancient, legendary times, the decisions of the people were carried out and disputes were settled in accordance with the law (Skovgaard-Petersen 29-30). Today, the term survives in the denotation of an archaeological site where, characteristically, one large flat stone marks the centre of a circle of upright stones and serves as a platform for speakers. In olden days, all decisions among citizens are believed to have been made at such places. It is the oldest known institution in which the commonwealth convened to rule in legal matters.<sup>9</sup> Freeman, among them innumerable peasants, would presumably assemble and form the



fundamental unit of government and law at local, provincial and sometimes national thing-steads located in the open air across the country. During the 13th and 14th centuries, the prerogatives of these assemblies were gradually eroded by the increasingly powerful groups of bureaucrats and nobles. The monarch lost his special alliance with the peasants, who in turn would soon become prisoners in a restrictive feudal system. Once freeholders, they were soon degraded to mere tenants [fæstebønder] in large numbers (Paludan 1). As Suhm writes, 'Instead of many thousands of independent farmers, one now had a few bishops, abbots and priors, and a few hundred lords [herremænd], who had turned the tillers of the land into serfs' (Suhm, vol. VIII, 336). Thus, in Danish history, the idea of a lost peasants' freedom is inextricably linked to the emergence of feudalism and its consequences.<sup>10</sup>

In a European 18th-century context, the myth of an original peasants' freedom has its origins in the writings of Montesquieu, who wrote of a Nordic liberty (*L'esprit des lois*, 1748), and the German philosopher Justus Möser (*Osnabrückische Geschichte*, 1768). Montesquieu gave the myth its classical formulation which is an attempt to return to early, fabled history writing and its ancient ideas of freedom in new contexts (cf. Kidd; Leerssen 39). In a larger framework of historiography, we will have to turn to the Roman history writer Publius Cornelius Tacitus (AD 56-117), who published his influential *De origine et situ Germanorum* in 98 AD. Tacitus saw the misdemeanours and shortcomings of the Roman Empire reflected in the cultural customs, laws and state of the Germanic tribes of his Germania. The virtues of the Germanic tribes and their primitivism were celebrated as a polar opposite to Roman decadence. Tacitus described depravity and immoral virtues as a consequence of the absolute powers of kings, said by some scholars to have caused the fall of the Roman Empire (Leerssen 71). In a Nordic context, the virtues of the tribal, ancient people were combined with the rule of a sovereign, a concept Suhm embraced and developed with reference to Danish history.

We know that Suhm's understanding of the peasantry and its freedom was also inspired by an earlier Danish historian, Hans Gram (1685-1748). In 1746, Gram claimed that the very word 'peasant' [bonde] had developed negative connotations as a consequence of the loss of the civil rights originally enjoyed by the peasantry (265). In 1771, Suhm would more or less adopt Gram's view of the peasantry as witnessed by his claim that until 1100,

Det ord Bonde var I de Tider et hæderligt navn, som Husbonde endnu vidner. De vare ei foragtelige og usle, som de, vi nu omstunder kalder Bønder, men de vare at ansee som vore Herremænd, kun at de vare mange flere i Tallet, og havde i visse Maader herligere rettigheder, i det de med Adlen eller de fornemmere udvalgte og stadfæstede vore Konger. (Suhm, vol. VIII, 120)<sup>11</sup>

This definition was soon to gain crucial significance among Danish historiographers. Ever since the death of Suhm it has been a common pursuit for Danish historians (and, interestingly, poets) to restore, in their writings, the lost civil liberties of the Danish peasantry. How and when this came about has been sub-

ject to numerous historically and geographically conditioned speculations. Similarly, interpretations depended on how conveniently the myth tied in with the current political situation. With the abolishment of serfdom in 1788, the myth of an original freedom was given even more credit. In Danish historiography, it has been emphasized that the agricultural reforms of 1788 were primarily the work of the Danish King, Frederic VI (1768-1839), who turned against the Danish nobility in favour of the peasants' interests. The agricultural reforms gave rise to what in Danish historiography has been called 'The Farmers' Interpretation', i.e. history writing focusing on peasants' rights and history (Kjærgaard). Other historical events which have been merged with the peasant myth in the course of history are the establishment of the Consultative Provisional Assemblies in 1831 and the Constitution of 1849. As an instrument of powerful cultural significance, the peasants' myth has shown enormous political potential in Danish society, eventually becoming an actual political tool. It has been adjusted a number of times in order to fit better with the given historical situation. However, the bond between sovereign and peasant was never seriously threatened in a broader perspective, not even in the aftermath of the French Revolution. On the contrary – between 1792 and 1797, at the height of the French Revolution, a national monument known as the Freedom Monument [Frihedsstøtten] was erected in Denmark, commemorating the freedom of the Danish peasants (Flacke 91).

The Danish historian Henrik Horstbøll has conducted extensive research on Danish monarchism within the framework of the French Revolution and Enlightenment (cf. 'Enevælde', 'Natural Jurisprudence'; Horstbøll and Østergaard). He concludes on several occasions that the Danish versions of monarchism from the Enlightenment onwards have had a somewhat rigid outlook. In a piece that was co-written with the scholar Uffe Østergaard, the Lex Regia [Kongeloven] (1665), the written constitution of Danish absolutism, serves as an interpretative starting point for this argument (5). The scholars contend that central elements from the writings of the Dutch jurist Hugo Grotius (1583-1645) were singled out and passed as law; they argue convincingly that Danish absolutism was, in fact, legitimized through the international language of natural law (cf. also Fabricius; Horstbøll, 'Natural Jurisprudence'; Olden-Jørgensen). From this time onwards, explaining freedom in terms of 'justice' gradually became common practice. Samuel Pufendorf's *De Jure Naturæ et Gentium* (1673), a definitive work of natural law and theory, had a particularly profound influence on Danish intellectual thinking. The protection of citizens through laws protecting both the individual and the public good was independent from the formal structure of government (Horstbøll and Østergaard 5). This line of argument was further developed by Danish early modern writers such as Ludvig Holberg (1684-1754) and Jens Schiønderup Sneedorff (1724-1764) who, it is claimed

laid the foundations for the ideological political bulwark which so successfully prevented the collapse of the absolutist political culture under the pressure of revolutionary demands for freedom during the period of the French Revolution. (6)

As a Romantic writer, Ingemann has always been said not to embrace politics in his writing. However, in his popular version of Danish history he evidently adopts the myth of an original peasants' freedom and thus perpetuates in a popular form an idea that political thinkers had developed as a useful model to defend Danish monarchism. The myth circulates in his writings alongside popular representations of the monarchy and considerations of a law-based Danish monarchy. Ingemann's history offers a theoretical framework in which the people can be regarded as the 'true sovereign'. This framework implies and insists on an original freedom in which the people – i.e. the peasants – actively participated in affairs of the state. This complex and fictitious historiographical constellation will be investigated in the next section.

### **The Representation of the Peasant Myth in Ingemann's History**

The myth of an original peasants' freedom is not made explicit in Ingemann's text. As a reader one needs to be well-informed about Danish and Nordic historiography in order to uncover this myth beneath the layers of national Romantic representations of kings and fatherlands, and the fascination with medieval knighthood. The myth is never broached via, say, allusions to the manner in which kings perform their duties. Not until later historical periods can common patterns of mentalities be identified, and their labels are, of course, also of a later date. Obviously, Ingemann would have had no inkling about the context in which the myth would circulate in future generations.

It is commonly accepted that, within the genre of the historical novel, the notion of Romantic medievalism emerged in the wake of the French Revolution.<sup>12</sup> Historical novels are often referred to as 'romances', indicating their penchant for medievalism, chivalry and romantic love, and a deep fascination with the Middle Ages. As such, Romanticism is a Janus-faced movement in that it can effectively serve conservative as well as radical ideologies. Ingemann's usages of Romantic medievalism are all centered on the symbolism of the thing-stead: a place where a primitive democracy was located in the medieval villages all across Denmark, where liberties were guaranteed by the contractual relationship between the people and the elected, popular monarch.

In *Waldemar the Great and his Men* (1824), we learn that the peasant Ole Stam used to speak at the thing-stead until tyrants came to power. Now Stam has to live as an outlaw because of his beliefs, or he will be killed by the new regime. In the following, we hear a conversation between him and Absalon, Saxo and Arnold who have taken shelter in his hiding place out in the forest:

“Have you not heard of Ole Stam?”  
The peasant then replied,  
“I've spoken on the Ting, and am  
In battle's danger tried  
I back'd against the tyrant Sven

The customs of our land,  
When coward, crouching Seelandmen  
First stoop'd to his command.  
While wealthy, thus I rais'd my voice  
And, outlaw'd, still will say, –  
A sov'reign, not the nation's choice,  
Slaves only can obey. ... ”  
(Ingemann, *Waldemar the Great and his Men*  
[Black, Young and Young 71])

Here, the basic ideas of the original peasants' freedom are borne out: only slaves, not freemen, can obey a tyrant, implying that the monarch must be elected by the commonality. Most importantly, it becomes clear that as a formerly wealthy owner of land, Ole used to have the right to speak at the thing-stead. In accordance with the peasant myth, property was associated with active participation in the political sphere. In these lines, the reader is offered the first glimpse of what can be construed as the myth of an original peasants' freedom in Ingemann's history. Ole is a prominent figure throughout the poem, fighting to restore the righteous King to the throne as well as to secure his own ancient rights. In one verse before Ole slays the tyrant king (yet another right according to the peasant myth), Ole refers to an ancient constitution in which peasants were equals with and advisors to their King:

Bonden taler fra høien Sten  
“Dankonning agted det ei før ringe  
Med Dannemænd at Raadslaa på Tinge  
Nu, som i hendenske Tid igjen  
Maa Sværdet skifte blandt Danske Mænd.”<sup>13</sup>  
(Ingemann, *Valdemar den Store og hans mænd* 62)

Again, the stone represents the thing-stead. The line ‘The sword must move among Danish men’ alludes to the ancient status of the monarch as an equal amongst other warriors. When, in *Valdemar den Store og hans Mænd* (1826), the king has been taken prisoner, the situation is described as follows:

All business was at standstill; sadness and gloom reigned in the peasant's hut as well as in the lordly castle. The women and children wept, and the men assembled in the streets as well as in the Council Chamber,<sup>14</sup> to consult, not about the choice of a new sovereign, nor how the land should be governed during this emergency, but only how to obtain vengeance and the King's release, in the event he was still alive. (Ingemann, *Waldemar surnamed Seier* [Chapman, 1841 219-220])

Evidently, the core issue in these lines is not the peasants' freedom but rather the problem of how to release the captured king. However, we also learn that when the people meet at the thing-stead the procedure is for them to consult,

govern and choose their kings. It could be argued that the peasants' freedom merely serves as a backdrop against which the history of great ancient kings is narrated. The thing-stead is important as a symbol of the old, legitimate rights of the people, and in every single piece of Ingemann's history, crucial action unfolds at these important law-sites, e.g. those in Nyborg, Ringsted and Viborg. It is here that the people vest the king with legitimate authority on behalf of the state. This theory of justice is omnipresent in Ingemann's literature. Moreover, freedom of expression is also valued: 'In Denmark, God be praised, thoughts, and their rudest expression, are still free, when the law of the land is not transgressed' (Ingemann, *The Childhood of King Erik Menved* [Kesson 30]). At the Dana Court in the village of Nyborg,<sup>15</sup> the following words are spoken: 'Not only were the vassals of noble extraction, the prelates and the bishops of the kingdom admitted, but also the peasants and the burghers' (Ingemann, *The Childhood of King Erik Menved* [Kesson 79]). As evidenced by the following passage, set at Dana Court, Ingemann also recounts the medieval decline of the ancient rights of the peasantry (as historiography has it in the tradition of Suhm):

As soon as Mass was over, the knights and ecclesiastics proceeded through the crowds to the long salon of the palace, where the Dane-Court was now held, instead of in the open air – an old custom, which, by degrees, fell more and more into disuse, much to the discontentment of the people, because by this means, it sought to exclude the burghers and peasants from taking part in the proceedings of the Danish parliament. (Ingemann, *The Childhood of King Erik Menved* [Kesson 70])

In Ingemann's history these are the darkest times; but thanks to the efforts and character of the Danish people the righteous king reconquers his kingdom, as chronicled by the last poem in the history, in which the Danish Queen Margaret I becomes the official representative of the three Nordic countries, Denmark, Norway and Sweden, following the meeting in Calmar.

Ingemann's description of the people is equally important for understanding how the myth of an ancient constitution of the free peasantry works in his literature. His depiction of commoners is an exemplary representation of the Romantic idea of the people as the true backbone of the country. This idea is illustrated in the following lines in which the singer Arnold appears alongside Saxo Grammaticus and Archbishop Absalon:

He boasts no lore – the dust of schools,  
 The careful cloister's polish'd rules,  
 He views with cool, contemptuous sneer –  
 But his the spirit of a Seer!  
 Dark and deep as ocean's roll  
 Often swells the old man's soul!  
 And his voice heroic thrills  
 Like the Elf's of northern hills,  
 Warning of the days to come;

And of God's avenging doom,  
Which he sees, tho' veil'd in gloom!  
(Ingemann, *Waldemar the Great and his Men*  
[Black, Young and Young 70; Milligan 211])

Arnold's acumen is mainly an expression of his transcendent, spiritual human condition which affords him insight into the 'real world'. He needs neither wisdom nor sword in order to gain a deep and wide understanding of the truth and to tell right from wrong. In fact, the entire intellectual climate of the 19th century was characterized by this quest for the true meaning of the world, its deeper spiritual essence (Leerssen 109 ff). Ingemann himself is no exception from this trend, and his beautifully realized Danish history elegantly combines Romantic thoughts with ideas passed down from the Enlightenment. The resulting picture, laid out in six works of historical literature, would enter the canon not only of Danish but also of Nordic historiography:

The peasants in this historiographical tradition were carriers of freedom and equality. They were the core of the folk, not as a passive crowd but as the incarnation and manifestation of the general will. The free peasant (odalbonden), who also became a political reality in Denmark in the 1780s when villeinage was abolished, was historically derived from the Viking age and a mythical past in which, when the peasants met at the thing, they were not only free but equal. (Stråht and Sørensen 8)

In Ingemann's works, the king is the representative of the people, but he is not an absolute ruler chosen by God. Ingemann's fictions play out the transformations from a liberal, popular monarchy to a tyrannical kingdom, and then back to a liberal monarchy again, in a non-violent manner. The author comprehensibly yet authoritatively presents complex historiographical thoughts while at the same time achieving easily readable and popular literature. His vision of an ideal state combines an un-modernized past, a modernizing present and a modernized future achieved without revolutionary cataclysm or a Napoleonic totalitarian empire. This makes his literature liberal for the time in which it was published. We have to bear in mind constantly that Ingemann's contemporary context and reality were those twelve years, from 1824 to 1836, in which Denmark was an absolute monarchy. There was no national parliament and no provincial or local assemblies. There was no freedom of speech. The King wrote and passed laws, and his officials saw to their implementation. When people offended or criticized the government, they were punished accordingly. The monarchy depicted by Ingemann is certainly not absolute, since ordinary people act on the political stage and have civic rights as members of the national and regional parliaments, the thing-steads. The peasantry is the epitome of the people, with role models such as Ole Stam, who is not afraid to speak up and take an active part in the affairs of the state, and the orphan Carl of Riise, who grasps the Danish banner as it falls from the sky during the crusade in 1219.

## Conclusion

In Denmark, the modernization of the state came about without heads rolling on the historical stage. By referring to an ancient constitution embodied by a politically active peasantry casting its votes at the thing-stead, it became possible to fuel (or fool) the self-image of the Danish people as originally free men living in harmony as subjects under an elected sovereign. Following the history of the most cited historian of his time, Peter Frederik Suhm, Ingemann integrated this interpretation into his six historical fictions, thus combining the intellectual impulses of Romantic thought with Enlightenment ideas. Ingemann's works constitute a narrative which resembles his predecessors' authoritative histories; but unlike them, they are composed as Romantic fiction, written in a smooth and controlled fashion while deliberately unfolding the idea of peasants' freedom. The myth of an original peasants' freedom has had an enormous impact on Danish society as an actual political tool. However, though this is the very essence of Danish history, it is in this sense difficult to say where myth ends and history begins.

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## Notes

- 1 'One day, on a peasant farm, he watched a puppet theatre, a farce, played by a travelling troupe. There was a lot of chatter in crude and squeaky voices he did not understand – there was shouting and noise. Finally a platform was raised upon which stood a small machine made of wood; accompanied by the noise of drums, barrels and shrieks two crowned puppet heads, also made of wood, were chopped off. The greatest tragedy of the era had become a spectacle for children and the mob who was laughing and had great fun. That the spectacle made a different impression on the small, puzzled spectator from the vicarage – and that he must already have had some idea of the horrible images acted out in front of him – is evident as all this time later he still remembers the ghastly sound of those puppet heads rolling on the stage.' (My translation)
- 2 A classic reference is Helge Paludan's 'Vor danske Montesquieu'. The term 'the myth of an original peasants' freedom' is not easy to translate into proper English. I have adopted it from my predecessors. Note that 'peasant' in this context does not carry the negative connotation of its modern-day usage.
- 3 An article on the specific use of New Historicism in the context of Ingemann's historical literature entitled 'Bondefrihed og andre verdensbiller' will appear in the historical journal *TEMP*, December 2012 (accepted).
- 4 For the most part, J. F. Chapman's translations have been used in this paper. Where no English version was available, the first German edition has been used instead, i.e. *Prinz Otto und seine Zeit and Königin Margarethe*.
- 5 Initially the attack on Ingemann was launched during Brande's lectures at the University of Copenhagen in 1871, titled Main Currents in the 19th Century's Literature (cf. Brandes).
- 6 To be found only in the foreword to *Prinds Otto af Danmark og hans samtid* [Prince Otto and his Time].
- 7 The *Gesta Danorum* was published in 1514 and has been the model for several historical narratives and histories in world literature, most notably Amler, better known as *Hamlet: Prince of Denmark* written around 1600 by William Shakespeare, which contains the famous line 'Something is rotten in the state of Denmark'.
- 8 For the reforms Struensee accomplished cf. Munck.
- 9 There are still innumerable thing-steeds left in the northern, or rather Germanic, parts of the European landscape. The oldest known thing-stead is Thingvellir in Iceland, which can be dated back to 930 A.D. and is listed as a World Heritage Site.
- 10 For general accounts of feudalism cf. Bloch; Ganshof. For Denmark in particular cf. Erslev, *Europæisk Feudalisme* as well as *Danmarks Riges Historie*. The founding father of Danish professional history, Erslev, did not recognise feudalism as a phenomenon that figured in the Danish context. Later on, however, Danish historians would apply European interpretations of feudalism to Denmark as well. It is commonly held that Danish feudalism emerged between 1241 and 1340, as it was presumably during this period that the monarchy and the peasantry started to lose power to the nobility and the clergy. This is the interpretation that Ingemann also subscribes to in his Danish history.
- 11 'That very word peasant [bonde] was an honourable name as the word master of the house [husbonde] still tells. They were not seen as despicable and common, as those we nowadays call peasants, but were seen as lords [herremænd], only they were in much larger numbers and in some ways had more rights, since they chose and paid homage to our kings, with the nobility and other fine people.' (My translation)

- 12 For the Middle Ages in literature, cf. Fay.
- 13 ‘The peasant speaks from the stone: / “Usually the Danish king did not find it a loss / On the Thing with Danes to discuss; / Now, as in ancient times again, / The sword must move among Danish men.”’ (My translation)
- 14 Translators of Ingemann’s history have had great difficulties in translating ‘tingsted’. The most common terms are Council Chamber and Parliament, which underline the thing-stead’s character of a democratic institution.
- 15 Literally ‘Danish Court’, both a medieval parliament and a thing-stead.