

COLONIES AND METROPOLE

Michael Bregnsbo, Niels Brimnes, Anne Folke Henningsen, Poul Erik Olsen, Mikkel Venborg Pedersen og Uffe Østergård

Danmark – En kolonimagt

Gads Forlag, 2017, 480 pages

Colonial history is a field that has developed rapidly in the Nordic countries since the start of the new millennium.¹ Old myths of the Nordic countries as the innocent bystanders of European colonialism have been comprehensively challenged, as have ideas of the Nordic countries as “good colonists”, pursuing a more benign form of overseas expansion compared to the major European powers like Britain, France and Germany.² As Magdalena Naum and Jonas M. Nordin wrote in their introduction to an anthology published in 2013, “colonialism in its many forms was part of the very fabric of the North European societies”, driven by the same motives as those operating in other parts of Europe: the pursuit of profit and political power.³ That the colonial ambitions of the Danish and Swedish kingdoms were only ever partly realised does not diminish the importance of researching them, and historians have also studied Nordic participation in informal colonialism, including trade and missionary activities.⁴

The reasons for this interest are not hard to find. The idea of Norden as a European periphery is no longer sustainable, if indeed it ever was. Almost half a century of mass immigration, including from non-European societies, and the debates about ethnic pluralism and cultural “otherness” that this has provoked, have focused attention on this further. Within history as an academic discipline, the rising interest in transnational and global history, with its emphasis on the importance of links, connections and interactions across national borders, has also had an influence.⁵ As Gunlög Fur has noted, however, where the Nordic countries

1 Also in fields other than history: see for example Larsen and Thisted, ‘Preface’, on postcolonial studies in Denmark. I would like to thank David Harvey, Hanna Hodacs, Magdalena Naum and Andrew Newby for their comments on an earlier draft. Any remaining mistakes and omissions are of course my own.

2 Ipsen and Fur: ‘Introduction’.

3 Naum and Nordin: ‘Introduction’, 5. On the scale of Danish colonial ambitions, see also Jónsson: ‘Denmark-Norway’.

4 See for example Rydén: ‘Från Gammelbo’. Rydén traces how iron exports connected Sweden to the Atlantic slave economy from the mid-seventeenth century. For some interesting reflections on Nordic “colonial complicity”, see Vuorela: ‘Colonial Complicity’; Palmberg, ‘The Nordic Colonial Mind’.

5 See for example Müller, Rydén and Weiss: *Global historia*. The challenge of global history has been debated in the context of Swedish history. See Amirell: ‘Den världshistoriska vändningen’, and subsequent debate articles in the same journal.

do seem to stand out is in the absence of a 'decolonising moment' similar to that experienced in other European colonial powers; the equivalent to the Suez crisis or the Algerian war, or more symbolically to the arrival of the *Empire Windrush* at the Tilbury docks in 1948.⁶ This may help to explain why uncritical attitudes to Nordic colonialism lingered as long as they did, which is not to suggest of course that larger colonial powers such as Britain and France should be regarded as models in this respect; far from it.⁷

The centenary of the transfer of sovereignty over the three Caribbean islands St. Croix, St. John and St. Thomas from the Danish crown to the USA, commemorated in March 2017, was the trigger for renewed national reflection and debate over Denmark's colonial past. Attention focused not least on the question of whether the Prime Minister should use the occasion to make a public apology for the Danish role in the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Gad's new five volume history of Danish colonialism, *Danmark og kolonierne*, was published to coincide with the centenary.

DANMARK – EN KOLONIMAGT?

The volume reviewed here is one of five multi-authored volumes in the series *Danmark og kolonierne*. The other four volumes cover Greenland, India (Tranquebar, Serampore and the Nicobar Islands), West Africa and the Caribbean islands. They were published simultaneously as a five-part set, but according to the publishers each book is also intended to stand alone. The volumes are thus not cross-referenced, though they do share a short foreword written by the series editors. The volume *Danmark – En kolonimagt* differs from the others in the series, in that the focus is not on the colonies but on the metropole. Two central themes are the evolution of the colonial administration and the economic and cultural significance of colonial trade.

The first theme is covered in chapters 3-5 by Michael Bregnsbo, who examines the rise of the Danish colonial realm in the early modern period, its decline during the nineteenth century and the residual legacies of colonialism for Denmark as a small state during the twentieth. Quite rightly, he emphasises throughout the connections with wider European developments, which is also a topic he returns to more explicitly in chapter 10. The overriding impression here is of the diversity of the realm and the lack of any coherent blueprint for its development; instead, in common with the other European colonial powers, it evolved sporadically and piecemeal. The central reference point – possibly the only point of coherence in

6 Fur: 'Colonialism', 23-6. Interestingly, Hans Hauge has suggested that postcolonial studies in Denmark developed first in the context of English literature studies, even though as he notes the Danish West Indies was very much part of the nineteenth century Danish consciousness. Hauge: 'Commonwealth'.

7 On the persistence of positive attitudes to colonialism in Denmark, see Olwig: 'Narrating Deglobalization'.

this ill-defined entity – was the person of the monarch himself. As Bregnsbo puts it, “the huge Danish state was in practice held together by very little except the person of the reigning monarch and his lawful claims to different territories, often under very different conditions”.⁸ As in most Danish historiography, 1864 is the major watershed and serves as the basis for the organisation of the chapters, though in this context 1814 or 1849 could also have been proposed as equally significant.

In chapters 6 and 7 Poul Erik Olsen focuses on the colonial administration and provides a useful overview of its complex legal and administrative history. Like Bregnsbo, he notes the lack of central control, again emphasising the role of the monarch as the unifying force. In chapter 6, the perspective is from the metropole looking outwards; in chapter 7 this is reversed and the focus is on the relations between the colonies and the metropole. It highlights the opportunities that a career in colonial administration could offer to an ambitious public servant, but also the challenges that accompanied it: isolation, difficult communications and the risks of tropical disease.

This is history from the colonisers’ perspective, of course. But the colonised subjects are not entirely absent. Enslaved individuals were brought to Denmark, and Olsen notes that it was confirmed in 1774 that slaves could be legally bought or sold in the kingdom of Denmark-Norway; there is even evidence that this was still regarded as acceptable in the 1830s (pp. 260-2). The striking image chosen for the front cover (and reproduced on pp. 240-1) shows N. P. Holbech’s portrait of the black servant Neki (whether she was free or enslaved is unknown) with a white infant in her arms. Olsen reminds us that, “the sight of people with dark skin colour was not unusual for the inhabitants of the capital” in the eighteenth century, where non-white household servants were seen as a mark of status for the well-to-do.⁹

Free individuals from Greenland or the West Indies also travelled to Denmark voluntarily or involuntarily: as seamen, servants, entertainers; as convicts if they were serving penal sentences longer than two years; or sometimes to be exhibited as “exotic others”, a practice which continued into the twentieth century. Many of those from Greenland especially seemed to have succumbed quite quickly to infectious diseases against which they had no immunity. From Olsen’s account, and perhaps reflecting the lack of suitable sources, we know very little about how these individuals experienced the society that they encountered.

8 “Den uhyre sammansatte danske stat blev i praksis holdt sammen af meget lidt andet end netop den regerende konges person og dennes retsmæssige adkomst til de forskellige territorier på ofte meget forskellige vilkår”, p. 120. My translation.

9 “Synet af mennesker med mørk hudfarve har ikke været ualmindeligt for indbyggerne i hovedstaden.” p. 255.

The links between colonies and metropole are also the focus of chapters 8 and 9 by Mikkel Venborg Pedersen, which examine the economic, social and cultural influences of colonial trade on the kingdom of Denmark. It is difficult to disagree with Pedersen's suggestion that "dealings with foreign goods was perhaps the area where the colonies had the greatest immediate influence [...] for so-called ordinary people".¹⁰ This was especially true of the eighteenth century, when the consumption of exotic colonial goods, including clothing, food, luxuries and decorations, became markers of status and identity for a rising new bourgeoisie. Göran Rydén's description of the eighteenth-century Swedish bourgeoisie as "provincial cosmopolitans" would undoubtedly apply equally well to their Danish counterparts.¹¹ The chapter is beautifully illustrated with reproductions of artwork and photographs of objects and interiors demonstrating this "cosmopolitanism". But what of the "so-called ordinary people"? It would have been interesting to take the story beyond the 1830s to consider the mass consumption of colonial goods such as coffee and sugar during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The same point could also be made about chapter 9, which is about the economic influences of the colonial trade. What was interesting here, however, was the exploration of the connections between Copenhagen, as the main port of the realm, and the extensive networks which connected it to other ports and their hinterlands, including of course in Norway (Drammen, Trondheim) and Slesvig-Holstein (Flensburg, Altona, Glückstadt). Here, though, and surprisingly for a volume that is otherwise so lavishly illustrated, I thought it was a pity that there were no maps. For readers that know the city of Copenhagen much better than I do, there would be much that is interesting to learn about the colonial traces in the city's streets and buildings, but here too it would have been helpful to have had these mapped.

Chapters 1 and 11, by Uffe Østergård and Anne Folke Henningsen respectively, are written in very different ways but deal with similar themes, in that they both reflect on the significance of colonies for our understanding of Danish history. Østergård's argument will be familiar to those who know his work in other contexts, but is no less important for that. He writes that the history of Denmark is actually the history of "two Denmarks", where the story of the small, relatively homogeneous nation state that was forged after 1864 has tended to eclipse memories of the earlier conglomerate state.¹² Henningsen's chapter traces the legacies of colonialism for modern Denmark in various areas, examining its impact on the built environment, monuments, scholarship, popular culture and everyday life. Colonial heritage is a major area of research in its own right, not easy to

10 "omgangen med fremmede varer var måske det område, hvor den umiddelbare påvirkning fra kolonierne hjemme i Europa var størst for såkaldt almindelige mennesker", p. 278.

11 Rydén: 'Provincial Cosmopolitanism'.

12 See for example Østergård: 'Myter'; Østergård: 'The Danish Path'.

summarise in one single chapter. The chapter is organised as a collage, presenting short discussions of subjects as diverse as debates over monuments and statues; the collection and preservation of ethnographical and anthropological artefacts in museum collections; the presentation of colonialism in historical non-fiction, fiction and drama; and the use of colonial motifs in advertisements. This will doubtless be an area for more research in the future, but it is a pity that this very interesting chapter, like the others, did not include full references, or indeed cross references to other volumes in the series (see below).

COLONIES AND EMPIRE

The production of an ambitious historical reference work like this series will inevitably require its editors to confront problems of definitions and categories: what to include and what to leave out. In their preface, the series editors state four criteria that define their understanding of colonialism. First, colonialism is understood as a modern phenomenon, which began with European expansion in the sixteenth century. Second, colonies were geographically distant from the metropole; and third, they were administrative entities with a separate political status from the rest of the realm. Fourth, colonial administration rested on assumptions about the existence of fundamental ethnic and cultural differences between colonisers and colonised (pp. 5-6).

In the Danish context, these criteria are significant above all with reference to the North Atlantic. Thus, Greenland is considered as part of the Danish colonial realm, while the Faroe Islands and Iceland are excluded. I see no reason to disagree with this, though it does raise a question with regard to northern Norway. The editors are careful to state that this is a history of the Danish-Norwegian colonial realm before 1814; the Danish after 1814. But one imagines that a specifically *Norwegian* colonial history (and indeed a Swedish-Finnish one too) would have given some attention to the experiences of the Sámi people. Greenland was allocated its own volume in this series precisely because of the notions of difference between colonisers and colonised “who were on the whole perceived and treated as ‘primitive people’, ethnically and culturally completely different to Danes and Norwegians”.¹³ This seems entirely reasonable, but there is little to suggest that attitudes to the Sámi people were significantly different. And although it could be argued that the colonisers they encountered were probably mostly Norwegians, rather than Danes, (and subjects of the Swedish crown until 1905), until 1814 at least they were nonetheless the subjects of the Danish king, just as the populations of Greenland and the West Indies were.

For the most part the authors of this book have avoided using the term “empire”, even though one of them, Michael Bregnsbo, co-authored a book on the

13 “[som] blev i det hele taget set og behandlet som et ‘naturfolk’, der var etnisk og kulturelt helt forskelligt fra danskere og nordmænd.” p. 6.

“Danish empire”, which is acknowledged (p. 448) as an important inspiration for the current volume.¹⁴ A short section on terminology by Bregnsbo and series editor Niels Brimnes (pp. 58-61) suggests that the reasons for this are temporal. The term imperialism applies above all to the European “scramble” after empire especially in Africa in the period 1870-1914, they argue, and is thus “less relevant as a term than colonialism for Denmark”,¹⁵ given that by the late nineteenth century the weakened Danish state was seeking to divulge itself of its remaining colonial possessions. It may indeed be justified to consider late nineteenth-century European *imperialism* as a historically specific phenomenon, but this is by no means irrelevant to Danish history. Indeed, the last third of the nineteenth century was the period when Denmark, rather than withdrawing into small state isolation after 1864, became ever more closely integrated with the world economy as an exporter of agricultural food products directly to the British Empire.¹⁶

It would be reasonable to argue that such criteria were always going to be necessary to keep the series manageable and coherent. But there is also the danger that their strict application can also obscure, by creating a dualism between the metropole and colony; the kingdom of Denmark and the wider colonial realm. I agree with Iver B. Neumann’s argument that attempts to claim the status of colonial victims for Iceland, the Faroe Islands and even Norway are problematic, not least in that such claims disregard the peculiar violence of the European colonial subjugation of non-European peoples.¹⁷ There are of course some parallels here with the debates about the use of colonial models for understanding the entangled histories of the different territories that make up the British Isles, especially Ireland, though we should also heed Stephen Howe’s warning that “ambivalence and ambiguity resonate throughout the story”.¹⁸ Comparing the status of Scotland and Norway within the British and Danish kingdoms respectively, Morten Skumrud Andersen has proposed the term “semi-centre” to describe these territories, both of which were separate political entities with their own administrative and legal traditions, but whose elites also shared strong connections to the metropolitan centre not least through their participation in colonial endeavours.¹⁹ Further

14 Bregnsbo and Jensen: *Det Danske Imperium*.

15 “et mindre relevant begreb for Danmark end kolonialisme”.

16 Norwegian “noncolonial colonialism” in this period is explored in Kjerland and Bertelsen: *Navigating Colonial Orders*. I would like to thank Magdalena Naum for bringing this to my attention; see also Naum’s review of this volume in *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History*, 17 (2), 2016.

17 For a critique of attempts to position Iceland, the Faroe Islands and Norway as “colonies” of a Danish empire, see Neumann: ‘Imperializing Norden’.

18 Howe: *Ireland and Empire*, 7-20, quote 13.

19 Andersen: ‘Hva var Norge’.

comparative historical studies – with Britain and with other European composite states – would doubtless be revealing.²⁰

In short, the entangled histories of the Nordic states cannot be considered without some reference to colonialism; but likewise the history of colonialism needs to be considered with reference to Nordic history. Uffe Østergård's observation that "the history of the colonies and the different parts of the realm is the other – more comprehensive – history of Denmark",²¹ could with equal justification be applied to Nordic history, or rather to west Nordic history in this case. The Danish missions to Greenland from the 1720s were justified, after all, with reference to histories of Norse expansion and colonisation in the medieval period, a historical memory which was to cause friction between Denmark and Norway in the first half of the twentieth century. It would be interesting to know how Danish and Norwegian identities were shaped through the shared experiences of colonial trade and administration, or indeed even if the distinction was relevant before 1814. And how was Danish colonialism shaped by the rivalry with the kingdom of Sweden, especially over control of the Øresund as a crucial shipping lane and trading route?

I should make it clear here that I am not in any way a specialist in colonial history. For me, the volume was interesting for the new perspectives it casts on Danish and indeed Nordic history more generally, and it is certainly to be hoped that this volume will help to stimulate further comparative work between the different Nordic countries, including for example on the different experiences and legacies of colonialism in the Danish and Swedish realms. But the challenge is also to think beyond the familiar categories of colonial history, Danish history or indeed Nordic history. As Johan Heinsen argues in his review of the West Indies volume of the present series, colonial history must not be allowed to become a specialist niche, but must be part of broader historical debates and historical curricula.²²

This raises one further important question: who is this book for? There is a tradition of producing multi-volume series on aspects of national history in Denmark and especially Norway (and interestingly enough, much less so in Sweden). The editors acknowledge this tradition by stating that they regard their series as the successor to *Vore gamle tropekolonier* (1952-3) and the supplement to *Politikens Danmarkshistorie* from the early 1980s (p. 5). The volume reviewed here will undoubtedly fulfil the role of an authoritative reference work – but the problem is that it lacks references. The most important works for each chapter are included in a

20 For a recent discussion of the potential and problems of comparing Finnish and Irish histories, see McMahon and Newby: 'Introduction', and other articles in the same issue of this journal.

21 "[k]oloniernes og de forskellige rigsdeles historie... er nemlig den anden – og fyldigere – danmarkshistorie". (p. 57).

22 Heinsen: 'Caribiske konflikter', 198.

bibliography – which is a very useful guide for further reading – but it is regrettable that either the editors or the publishers have taken the decision to forego footnotes. To single out just one example, in chapter 11 Anne Folke Henningsen refers to a public debate arranged by “a Danish journal” in the spring of 2015, and she even quotes from the editors’ introduction to the debate. But the journal in question is not referred to in the bibliography, as far as I can tell, so it is not easy to follow up this up.

I presume that the lack of footnotes was inspired by the intention to make the book attractive to the broadest possible readership, which is a laudable aim in itself, but at the same time it is hard to comprehend why that should necessarily mean no footnotes. The book – and indeed the whole series – otherwise lives up to expectations in that regard: it is well-written, beautifully presented and generously illustrated. It would grace any bookshelves. But I fear it would also mostly have to remain on the bookshelf. This is a large and heavy volume, an essential addition to library collections but scarcely practical for reading away from a desk. I do not know if there are any plans to produce a condensed version of the series in paperback form, but I would very much hope that this would be the case.

Even more importantly, I think it is essential that serious thought be given to producing an authoritative English translation of the entire series. The volume reviewed here is written by historians working in Danish universities, and it was presumably written largely with a Danish readership in mind. That is important of course, and there will undoubtedly continue to be important debates about colonialism in Denmark even now that the 2017 centenary has passed. An English translation would greatly assist in the challenge of incorporating Danish colonial history into its wider Nordic and European context, but also with writing a Danish colonial history that also incorporates the perspectives of historians working in the former colonies.²³

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Amirell, Stefan Eklöf: 'Den världshistoriska vändningen. Möjligheter och problem i relation till svensk historisk forskning', *Historisk Tidskrift (SV)* 128 (4), 2008, 647-669.
- Andersen, Morten Skumsrud: 'Hva var Norge i det danske imperiet? Skottland og Norge som semi-sentra', *Internasjonal Politikk*, 72 (3), 2014, 367-387.
- Bregnsbo, Michael and Kurt Villads Jensen: *Det Danske Imperium. Storhed og fald*, København: Aschehoug, 2004.
- Fur, Gunlög: 'Colonialism and Swedish History: Unthinkable Connections?'. In Magdalena Naum and Jonas M. Nordin (eds.): *Scandinavian Colonialism and the Rise of Modernity: Small Time Agents in a Global Arena*, New York: Springer, 2013, 17-36.

23 According to the author biographies, all of those contributing to the series were based at institutions in Denmark, or in a few cases at institutions in the UK, the US and Norway. The exception is the volume on Greenland, which includes chapters written by scholars working in Greenlandic institutions. It should be noted that I am referring only to institutional affiliations here. It is not my intention to speculate on the personal identities and backgrounds of the authors.

- Hauge, Hans: 'Commonwealth og Caribien eller Postkolonialisme og De Dansk Vestindiske Øer', *Tijdschrift for Skandinavistiek* 30 (2), 2009, 13-47.
- Heinsen, Johan: 'Caribiske konflikter', *Temp: Tidsskrift for Historie*, 15, 2017, 189-199.
- Howe, Stephen: *Ireland and Empire: Colonial Legacies in Irish History and Culture*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, paperback edition 2002; first published 2000.
- Ipsen, Pernille and Gunlög Fur: 'Introduction', *Itinerario* 33 (2), 2009, 7-16.
- Jónsson, Már: 'Denmark-Norway as a Potential World Power in the Early Seventeenth Century', *Itinerario*, 33 (2), 2009, 17-27.
- Kjerland, Kirsten Alsaker and Bjørn Enge Bertelsen (eds.): *Navigating Colonial Orders. Norwegian Entrepreneurship in Africa and Oceania*, New York: Berghahn Books, 2015.
- Larsen, Ingemai and Kirsten Thisted: 'Preface', *Tijdschrift voor Skandinavistiek* 30 (2), 2009, 5-12.
- McMahon, Richard and Andrew G. Newby: 'Introduction – Ireland and Finland, 1860-1930: Comparative and Transnational Histories', *Irish Historical Studies*, 41 (160), 2017, 166-179.
- Müller, Leos, Göran Rydén and Holger Weiss (eds.): *Global historia från periferin: Norden 1600-1850*, Lund: Studentlitteratur, 2010.
- Naum, Magdalena and Jonas M. Nordin: 'Introduction: Situating Scandinavian Colonialism'. In Magdalena Naum and Jonas M. Nordin (eds.): *Scandinavian Colonialism and the Rise of Modernity: Small Time Agents in a Global Arena*, New York: Springer, 2013, 3-16.
- Neumann, Iver B: 'Imperializing Norden', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 49 (1), 2014, 119-129.
- Olwig, Karen Fog: 'Narrating Deglobalization: Danish Perceptions of a Lost Empire', *Global Networks*, 3 (3), 2003, 207-222.
- Palmberg, Mai: 'The Nordic Colonial Mind'. In Suvi Keskinen, Salla Tuori, Sari Irni and Diana Mulinari (eds.): *Complying with Colonialism: Gender, Race and Ethnicity in the Nordic Region*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2009, 35-50.
- Rydén, Göran: 'Från Gammelbo till Calabar: Det svenska järnet och den expanderande atlantiska ekonomin'. In Leos Müller, Göran Rydén and Holger Weiss (eds.): *Global historia från periferin: Norden 1600-1850*, Lund: Studentlitteratur, 2010, 75-96.
- Rydén, Göran: 'Provincial Cosmopolitanism: An Introduction'. In Göran Rydén (ed.): *Sweden in the Eighteenth-Century World: Provincial Cosmopolitans*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2013, 1-31.
- Vuorela, Ulla: "Colonial Complicity: The 'Postcolonial' in a Nordic Context". In Suvi Keskinen, Salla Tuori, Sari Irni and Diana Mulinari (eds.): *Complying with Colonialism: Gender, Race and Ethnicity in the Nordic Region*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2009, 19-33.
- Østergård, Uffe: 'Myter om den danske stat', *Kvan*, 67, 2003, 42-61.
- Østergård, Uffe: 'The Danish Path to Modernity'. In Jóhann Páll Árnason and Björn Wittrock (eds.): *Nordic Paths to Modernity*, Oxford: Berghahn, 2012, 49-68.

MARY HILSON

PROFESSOR

INSTITUT FOR KULTUR OG SAMFUND

AARHUS UNIVERSITET

MARY.HILSON@CAS.AU.DK