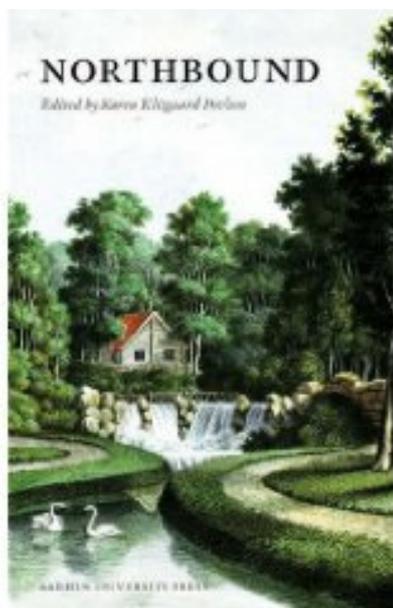


## Between the uncomfortable and the sublime

*Discussions of language, cities, landscapes, individuals, peoples, intellectuals, gender stereotypes and their placing in a shifting semantic field of a geographically flexible and heterogenous North*

Karen Klitgaard Poulsen (red.): *Northbound. Travels, Encounters, and Constructions 1700-1830*. Aarhus University Press 2007. 411 s., 398 kr.



by Hagen Schulz-Forberg

*Northbound* has all the advantages and disadvantages of an edited volume. Karen Klitgaard Poulsen has managed to collect an impressive amount of highly interesting and entertaining contributions – thereby fulfilling the old role of travel writing itself: to be useful and entertaining (*utile* and *dulce*). On the other hand, the volume clearly has its deficits when it comes to coherence. The book is divided into two parts: “Constructions – Naming and Defining the North”; and “Travels – Encountering and Experiencing the North”. Some contributions in the first part rely on travels and travel writing, and some contributions in the second part are not only relying on travels and travel writing. Here, some more conceptual clarity would have been helpful in order to keep the two parts separate.

### **Terra incognita**

The setting of the scene is promising and well-executed: here is a volume that deals not only with the national romanticism of the nineteenth century; rather, here is a volume that goes beyond that, or, before that, namely to the eighteenth century in order to show the origins of a

Northern discourse that would lead to a construction of a Scandinavian “Norden” only later (cf. Sørensen and Stråth 1997). And it is an inspiring read to learn about the Enlightenment discourses on the North before the takeover of nineteenth century nationalism and its attachment to landscape and supposedly authentic culture we know so well from historical analysis and from the museums of national art, which are full of pathos, battles, landscapes, and heroes. In eighteenth century Europe, the North was Europe’s *terra incognita* to some degree, full of darkness and unknown customs and people. Jesper Hede shows the European invention of Nordic literature and the placing of this literature on the usual Enlightenment scale of being civilised or rather less so. When seen from a European perspective, the North was constructed as lagging behind.

Simultaneously, Klitgaard Poulsen elaborates, this process of becoming Northern would be embedded in *Northbound* through the European context of travel writings about the region and the encounters between Europeans and those Northerners. Peter Stadius contributes to this perspective with his analysis of the image of Gustav Adolph in Seventeenth Century Spain – taking the reader, however, out of the eighteenth century. He shows the attachment of a Spanish discourse of the Gothic to the Swedish king and also the insecurity about which kind of Goth he was: a heroic or a monstrous one. Karen Klitgaard Poulsen mentions already in the introduction how diversely the North has been conceived in history and Hendriette Kliemann-Geisinger provides a comprehensive account of the varieties of imaginations attached to the North. In the eighteenth century, Russia was still North and Catherine the Great the Northern Star. This Russian North was represented by St. Petersburg, whereas Moscow was an older Russia, more Asian, less European city. Looking at travel writing and novels – two highly popular genres at the time – as well as letters, *Northbound* is an important contribution to the early beginnings of national and regional stereotyping before the North became sublime (as Marianne Raakilde Jespersen shows in her contribution) just like most national romantic sceneries.

Not surprisingly, and beside the fact that especially Sweden was still a powerful European state at the time,

the North is coined as an uncomfortable, wild and dark place in the eighteenth century. In this climate, Spanish authors would conclude, it comes as no surprise that the Northern people are barbaric because it is so difficult to control one's instincts in an unbalanced climate. This is one of the contradictions that are left unresolved in *Northbound* or at least could have been elaborated more: if all North is wild and dark – what about St. Petersburg? If North did not only entail today's Scandinavian countries, but also Russia, Central Europe, and in some versions even England (as transpires from Klitgaard Poulsen's contribution on intellectual encounters with but mostly in Copenhagen) then how could it have been dark and wild and uncomfortable? Surely St. Petersburg and London were places firmly rooted in the modern discourse of being ahead rather than behind.

#### Romantic folk-based nationalism

The contributions by Bernd Henningsen already takes the reader to the nineteenth century and deals with the perception of Johann Gottfried Herder in the framework of romantic, folk-based nationalism. He follows the perception and discussion of Herder in detail and it is interesting to learn about the manifold entanglements between Herder's ideas and their Northern appropriation. The Herderian tradition places the North clearly among the civilised regions and the national impetus of Herder is taken up by Nikolai Grundtvig. The nineteenth century thus is a century in which the Northern countries insert themselves into a European nation-building discourse and Iceland becomes the Athens or Greece of the North (as Sumarlídi R. Isleifsson shows) – like so many other nations in Europe at different points in time. And Stockholm, in the eyes of the Enlightenment political travel writer Johann Gottfried Seume, becomes the paradise of the North (as Pär Eliasson illustrates in his contribution).

Taking the reader from the Hellenic Icelanders to the German perception of Copenhagen almost a century earlier, Karen Klitgaard Poulsen illustrates encounters of intellectuals in Copenhagen. The city itself is not present in her contribution however. While it is fascinating to learn about the different encounters and constructions of the North, it is hard to imagine that the city itself did not serve as an entry point into this discourse – and if it did not, this would have been an interesting aspect to ponder.

Karin Sanders continues the volume with her elaboration on the construction of the Danish past through archaeology and Kirsten Gomard depicts the entertaining debate about Nordic languages between the Danish scholar Rasmus Rask and the German philologists, the

brothers Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, particularly with Jacob Grimm. After some rather hefty scholarly exchange, Nordic languages were finally considered under the category of Germanic languages – and not just as a Low Saxon dialect. Between the two contributions, Marianne Raakilde Jespersen considers the interpretation and gendered geography of the North in Madame de Staël's writing, which marked the North as sublime.

The above mentioned contradiction between the semantically and geographically shifting North in history and the volume's concentration on today's Scandinavia is exacerbated by the second part. The travels and travel writings are only about today's region and exclude comparisons between Scandinavia and Russia – both belonging to the North in the eighteenth century. Thus, after having shown the existence of a variable North, a stable North is somehow confirmed by the second part of the book. The region treated by the travel writers represented in *Northbound* includes Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Finland, as well as Iceland and Greenland – neatly fitting the Scandinavian region of today. It remains an interesting read, however. To learn about the connections between discourses on Inuit and Danes from 1700 to 1850 from Karen Langgård is fascinating, and to see how much a European frame of civilisation has discursively pushed the uncivilised further away the more infrastructure and administration advanced neatly shows the civilisation catalogue in the mind of foreign travellers. Similarly to the perception of Eastern Europe (Wolff 2005), the Northern ways of worship and organising society represent backwardness, making a civilised way of practising religion a sign of progress. The nineteenth century saw the slow inclusion of the stereotypically uncivilised native into a so-constructed civilised way of life.

Other contributions deal with the perception of peculiar places and their role in Northern discourse. Antje Wischmann reflects on the library of Lövstabruk as utopia and Peter Fjågesund concentrates his analysis on the history and myths of Rjukan in Norway as a place of national representation from landscape to nuclear energy (and the nightmare version of this energy).

Furthermore, Karen Klitgaard Poulsen reflects on the genre of travel writing in the eighteenth century, Bjarne Rogan gives an overview on travelling and encounters to Norway, and Anka Ryall reports on the perception of Lapland as a humbling place and a test of masculinity represented by this Northern *terra incognita*. Stephanie Buus follows the traces of Christen Pram's vanishing as a mystery case. Pär Eliasson ponders the German political view on the Swedish state and its capital, and Syl-

wia Schab looks at Polish travel writing to Northern countries.

#### **Difficult and heterogeneous sources**

Travel and travel writing constitute a difficult and heterogeneous source. *Northbound* gives wonderful insights into many aspects of the subject and its connection to the North. What the volume lacks is conceptual clarity and a stricter editorial ordering. It would maybe have been helpful to concentrate on travel in a more focused way. Or to focus on the eighteenth century, where the volume's focus is fresh and sobering in relation to the nation-building of the nineteenth century. To be sure, as a methodological framework, the volume claims to be inspired by imagology, yet it includes many other approaches just as well and does not deepen the inspiration into analysis. The fruitful approaches by Tzvetan Todorov and Michel Foucault are mentioned yet not operationalised either. This leads unfortunately to confusion about the goal of the book and makes it more a collection of highly interesting essays about different aspects of constructing the North. It could have been helpful to include the notion of travel as cultural practice as a framework for the approach to understanding travel and travel writing as well as the reproduction and transfer of knowledge and images (Bauerkämper et al. 2004).

The proclaimed underlying structures of the book, as for example the role of gender and bodily practice, are hardly holding the contributions together and seem to have been found mainly after the authors had finished their pieces and did not serve as a guideline for the authors in the first place. Finally, the claim that *Northbound* would contribute to a better understanding of today's globalization (p. 23) by a recurrent discussion of the theme is so well-hidden between the lines that it remains invisible.

*Northbound* can be recommended for students and researchers interested in aspects of discourses and constructions of Northern identity. Discussions of language, cities, landscapes, individuals, peoples, intellectuals, gender stereotypes and their placing into a shifting semantic field of a geographically flexible and heterogeneous North illuminate a complicated field of study. For this, *Northbound* is a new source. The editor, Karen Klitaard Poulsen, is aware of the structural deficiencies and hopes the reader may find inspiration and not too many mistakes. This is a cordial and open statement which should lead the readers of *Northbound* into the right direction: to be inspired by its contributions and to follow some of the lines of thought through the excellent endnote apparatus and bibliography.

*Northbound* overall clearly contributes to a still emerging field of historical research.

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#### **Literature**

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