

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Ole Bernt Henriksen. *Af Guds NÖjde. Christian den Femte og Hans Regering*. Odense: Odense University Press, 1996. 247 pp. DKK 225.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-87-7838-039-5.

Reviewed by Michael Bregnsbo (Institute of History and Western Civilization, University of Odense)

Published on H-Skand (January, 1997)

The period between the introduction of absolutist government in Denmark in 1660 and the period of the Great Agricultural Reforms (from about 1770 till about 1800) has traditionally been neglected in Danish political historiography though, in recent years, much is being done to repair this. But formerly, it has been as if the Age of king Christian the Fourth and the introduction of absolutism by his son, Frederik the Third, on the one hand and the agricultural and many social changes of the late eighteenth century have drawn most of the attention of historians leaving the period in between has been more or less overlooked. Furthermore, monographs of Danish absolutist kings are rare. Consequently, a biography of king Christian the Fifth (born 1646, king of Denmark & Norway 1670-1699) is wellcome.

The author, Ole Bernt Henriksen, is a journalist and has for many years been a Conservative member of the Danish Parliament and is the author of several books about political and social topics and of a biography of the world-famous Danish astronomer and many-sided and efficient civil servant Ole Rømer (1644-1710). Christian the Fifth was the first king who inherited the throne, and during his reign, absolutism as a political and administrative system was institutionalized and consolidated. And even if Danish economy during most of his reign was marked by stagnation or recession many profound and decisive reforms actually took place: the Danish Law from 1683 and the Norwegian Law from 1687 meant uniform legislation in in all the provinces of Denmark and Norway respectively and the land survey (matriklen) of 1688 meant a detailed measuring and assessment of Danish farm land, a survey which made the basis of general taxation during the next more than hundred years. Furthermore, the period was marked by conflict with Sweden in the Scanian War from 1675-79. Another security

problem for Denmark was the duchy of Holstein-Gottorp which was situated within the precincts of the Danish monarchy and whose duke was a relative and an ally of the Swedish king. Consequently, Denmark was facing a hostile encirclement and this security problem was as acute as ever at the death of Christian the Fifth.

Those historians who have actually described king Christian has seen him as good-natured, well-meaning, persistent and as having the common touch, but above all regarded him as weak, dependent on his advisors and indecisive (not to put it more bluntly). Henriksen's book is well-written and easily readable, divided into many short chapters. He has a thorough knowledge of king Christian's life and surroundings. Especially, he has a good eye for the cultural and daily life aspects. Christian the Fifth is described as a person, much is said about his relation to his father, Frederik the Third, his hunting pleasures and finally his illness and death struggle.

Many portraits are reproduced and these are N.B. not purely ornamental but directly incorporated and interpreted within the ordinary text, something which is usually seldom seen. Among the most interesting parts of the book are those about the mighty chancellor, count Griffenfeld. Unlike traditional research, Henriksen considers the relationship between Griffenfeld and the king as one between a master and his apprentice, a relationship which was finally denounced by the king. As a consequence of this interpretation, the famous letter from the king to Griffenfeld in 1675 in which the king describes what displeases him, is interpreted in a new way. In the letter Griffenfeld is among other things reproached for giving orders in the king's presence, orders that the king himself ought to give, and goes on: "og når jeg siger noget, da hjælp mig udi mine tanker, bring mig ikke først på én sentiment og (derefter) på en anden mening igen"

(p. 162, “and when I say something, then help me in my thoughts, do not bring me first one opinion and then another one”). Traditionally, this letter has been interpreted as an outburst of frustration from the king, badly or hardly educated himself, against his efficient, learned and dazzlingly intelligent chancellor. A desperate cry of distress from a monarch, ridden by inferiority complexes. According to Henriksen, the letter should be seen as a denunciation of Griffenfeld by the king and it is compared with a vote of no confidence. Not from a democratically elected parliament to a self-willed prime minister, but from an absolute monarch to his headstrong chancellor. And the only reason for the dramatical and fatal fall of the chancellor in 1676 was the fact that he failed to take the hint and resign himself.

From 1676 on, king Christian was his own prime minister. Certainly, he had his limitations as such and these are not concealed. He still needed the support from other people, these did still have much to say, e.g. the bureaucratic cabal headed by the courtier Vincent Hahn and later on the efforts of finance minister Christian Sigfried von Plessen. But Henriksen points out that now the king was behind everything and knew how to interfere and control and was really hard-working and vigilant till the day of his death.

The first a little more than hundred pages are devoted to the previous history, namely the late reign of the grandfather, Christian the Fourth, and of the father, Frederik the Third, with particular emphasis on the introduction of absolutist government. Certainly, these aspects are important and necessary, but in my opinion they are oversized, the more so as the author does not seem to be as familiar with recent research about these previous ages as with the one about the age of Christian the Fifth.

The social and economic development of Denmark during the reign of Christian the Fifth is also mentioned but without references to recent research. Consequently, the description of Danish agriculture in general and the relations between landlords and tenant-farmers in particular is traditional and in many respects obsolete. According to the introductory chapter, the author has been in the Danish National Archives (Rigsarkivet) but it is nowhere mentioned which sources he has been studying there. The book has no footnotes and the bibliography is only referring to research literature and printed sources and the number of titles there is impressive.

In between, there are postulates that seem doubtful or at best need further argumentation. E.g. “..menneskene var dengang mindre materialistisk bekymrede, end vi er.”

(p. 67). (“people were then less materialistically worried than we are.”) After a description of Denmark’s precarious geopolitical situation and, as a consequence of that, low value as a potential ally, the author goes on: “På den anden side var militæralliancer i det 17. århundrede stedse så ustabile, at det kunne være mest forstandigt helt at undgå dem, men det var endnu ikke gået op for nogen” (p. 85). (“On the other hand, military alliances of the seventeenth century were ever so unstable that it might be the most sensible thing fully to avoid them, but no one had realized that yet.”) And about queen Charlotte Amalie it is said that she was “et af de få oprigtigt kristne mennesker i sin københavnske samtid” (p. 212), “one of the few genuinely Christian people in Copenhagen of her time.”)

On page 132 it is said that queen Charlotte Amalie lent her name to Charlottenborg and the Amalienborg group of buildings (Amalienborgkompleksen). Charlottenborg is correct but Amalienborg was named after her mother-in-law, queen Sophie Amalie and the place was originally called Sophie-Amalienborg.

The title “Af Guds nåde” (By the grace of God) is referring to the theocratic thinking of the age and it is certainly right that Christian the Fifth saw himself that way (so it appears from his testaments). And even to a higher degree that the absolutist constitution, Kongeloven/Lex Regia (the Royal Law) from 1665 did actually allow. According to this law, the absolute power had been voluntarily transferred from the subjects to the king and God had only contributed indirectly by inducing the subjects to do so. However, the formula “by the grace of God” does by no means imply absolutist government or even theocracy. The formula was also used by Danish kings before 1660 and is still used by the present Danish queen. Therefore, the title of the book is not the best thinkable one. The title of one of the chapters, namely “Guds stedfortræder” (God’s substitute) is somewhat better, but even this title does not imply absolutism, it is part of Lutheran theology.

As mentioned in the beginning, Christian the Fifth and his age has until recent years been somewhat neglected in Danish research. A monograph of him is therefore meritorious. Henriksen is here giving a more balanced and detailed view on a king who has traditionally been underestimated and misunderstood and is thereby contributing to a an upgrading reappraisal. Further studies must show if this attitude can be preserved, but at least trends in recent research are pointing in a similar direction.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-skand>

Citation: Michael Bregnsbo. Review of Henriksen, Ole Bernt, *Af Guds NÖyde. Christian den Femte og Hans Regering*. H-Skand, H-Net Reviews. January, 1997.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=775>

Copyright © 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.