Bookshelf: The Breakthrough of Environmental History

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Bookshelf,Series

Review of *Stormflod* by **Bo Poulsen** (Aarhus University Press, 2019)

By **Katie Ritson**

This book is volume 24 in the **high profile series "100 Histories of Denmark"** published by Aarhus University Press, which over eight years will see a range of historians present the hundred most important historical events and topics from Danish history. The books are meant to be accessible in every sense; the Danish language used is straightforward, the books short (each set at exactly 100 pages, with many high-quality illustrations), and they are all available as PDFs, audio books, and in e-reader format as well as in hardback form at the competitive price of 100 Danish kroner. As such, these books have the potential to be enormously influential in Denmark in terms of the popular understanding of History and its relevance for the times we live in.

Poulsen's volume in this series takes as its starting point a storm flood in 1825. This particular event was not the worst storm flood to strike the North Sea coast on the Danish peninsula of Jutland during the modern period—there were no human fatalities in Northwest Jutland, and the immediate damage was confined to farmsteads close to the coast. But the volume and force of the seawater in the 1825 storm succeeded in breaking through the narrow strip of land that separated a large fjord—the Limfjord, which opens into the Kattegat to the east of Jutland—from the North Sea. Saltwater flooded in through the gap, with consequences for both human and aquatic inhabitants of the fjord region that played out over the months, years, and decades following the storm.

Poulsen uses the storm flood of 1825 as a prism to explore both backwards and forwards in time. The settlement of Limfjord was dependent on its geography, with a small population engaged mostly in small-scale farming and fishwork, and trading routes converging on the town of Aalborg at the neck of the fjord in the east. The access to the

North Sea that became available in the years after the 1825 flood transformed the nature of trading in northern Denmark, not just in that it allowed the western harbour towns (in particular Thisted) to flourish, but also in that it facilitated the easy passage of goods (such as coal), technology, and ideas from the industrialising nations to the west, and from Great Britain in particular. It also completely changed the nature of fishing in the Limfjord. Fish that had previously been plenteous, such as herring and the European whitefish, disappeared from the fjord in the years after 1825, and new species began to appear, calling for new techniques and trade relations as they did so.

Stormflod is composed of five parts; the introductory section "Life on the Edge," which sets out the event of the storm in 1825, and four subsequent parts, "Adaptation and Control;" "The Blue Larder;" "The Queen and the Others" and "Adaptation and Control for New Times." Whilst setting out from the drama of the storm flood and the people most immediately affected by it, the story Poulsen sets out to tell is a much larger and longer one. In his account, Poulsen is careful to show how the 1825 storm and its fallout are entangled with other developments during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The rise of beach seine net fishing and subsequent overfishing of the waters, the changing demand for eel and herring, and the salinization of the Limfjord were all factors in the way that the aquatic resources—the blue larder, as Poulsen has it—were perceived and managed. Similarly, ideas about the control of nature and the pursuit of progress were already in circulation before trade with England started to pass through the gap at Agger Tange. 1825 is a prism through which to see a complex and many-layered story of northern Jutland; a moment that draws together changes that are happening across multiple timescales, rippling outward from the site of the storm. Poulsen wears his scholarship lightly, but his manipulation of the different timescales in his story, from deep time to the short life-cycles of herring and eel, is deft and compelling: his use of a wide range of sources—from records of fish exports to traveller's accounts, from newspaper reports to poetry—makes for a rich and lively read.

Stormflod does not shy away from the implications of this kind of history. In showing how precarious life on the Jutland coast has been in the past, at the mercy of weather, tides, and the availability of sufficient fish, Poulsen draws parallels to the current climate crisis and the new dependencies that are likely to emerge. Sometimes the echoes are subtle, for example his use of the term "climate refugees" to refer to the 72 people who moved inland from Harboøre parish in 1826, but in other places he makes explicit the connections between then and now. "Under the circumstances," he notes in the book's concluding pages, "it's not a moment too soon for us to start to prepare for the

changed world that our children will inherit in just a few decades. In these altered conditions, the type of storm flood that we know from history, like for example the Limfjord storm flood of 1825, will batter the low-lying Danish coasts with far greater consequences than hitherto." **[1]**

The term breakthrough—*gennembruddet*—is a loaded term in Danish. It can be both a physical and metaphorical event, and it carries the legacy of the Danish literary critic Georg Brandes, who charged nineteenth-century writers with taking up the most problematic social issues of the day in realist novels and plays. Through its linking of historical landscape change to the political dilemmas of today, Bo Poulsen is true to the radical tradition of *gennembruddet*, in this case the breakthrough of environmental narratives into the mainstream understanding of history. His book makes clear the way in which natural and human histories interact, and the extent to which non-human agencies intersect with human ideas about progress and decline. I hope that this book will find its way into other languages besides Danish. With a reach far beyond its very local geographical focus, it is a brilliant example of the power of environmental history for a general audience, in particular through its critical relevance to the times we live in now. But it will also appeal to scholars of the environmental humanities and environmentalists more broadly through its recognition of more-than-human agencies and its careful exploration of the degree to which we are all dependent on the land, and the water, on which and with which we live.

Katie Ritson is senior editor at the Rachel Carson Center and the author of **The Shifting Sands of the North Sea Lowlands: Literary and Historical Imaginaries.**

[1] p. 98 "Under alle omstændigheder er det ikke et sekund for tidligt, at vi forbereder os på den forandrede verden, der bliver vores børns i løbet af relativt får årtier. Under sådanne forhold vil den type af stormfloder, vi har kendt til i historisk tid, fx i Limfjorden i 1825, ramme de lavtliggende danske kyster med langt større konsekvenser end hidtil."