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REVIEW

Erik Beukel, Frede P. Jensen & Jens Elo Rytter

*Phasing out the Colonial Status of Greenland,
1945-1954: A Historical Study,*
translated by Nancy E. Ake Aen

Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2010;
pp.479. £57.50

ISBN 978-87-635-2587-9

THIS is an impressive volume for what seems like a short historical period, you might think, when faced with the 478 page long *Phasing out the Colonial Status of Greenland, 1945-54*. However, the decisive nature of the political events that occurred during these 9 years in both Denmark and Greenland have had such a lasting effect, they undoubtedly deserve to be explored, clarified and recorded in detail. Requested in 2004 by the then Greenlandic Prime Minister Hans Enoksen from the then Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen, this meticulously researched account into the political background to Greenland's integration as a Danish-Greenland project traces the "the circumstances concerning Greenland's change in status from a colony to an equal part of the Kingdom of Denmark" (p.9).

The central aim of the volume is to supply a detailed and extensive survey of the political events leading up to, and succeeding, one of the most important events that shaped the political relationship between Denmark and Greenland: the amendment of the Danish Constitution in 1953, which granted Greenlanders equal rights as citizens within the Danish realm. Erik Beukel, Frede P. Jensen and Jens Elo Rytter, scholars from the Danish Institute for International Studies, have provided comprehensive reports on the political history surrounding Greenland's change of status and the main actors involved in what they refer to as a (political) "decolonization" of Greenland's

status between 1945-54, in particular the changes in international law and the role of the United Nations.

It is not until the 1960 that we see colonial powers accepting the right of colonies to self-determination, and decolonization becoming international governmental policy. The political and historical context of this particular change in governance thus falls into a transitional period for both international law and its application by the UN and European nation states alike. Interesting and complex agendas motivated the whole process, some of which are explored in a short chapter on "Why was the integration solution desirable?" (p.382-385). The appendices provide additional detail on this issue, from Icelandic claims to Greenland in Appendix 13 to the interesting historical background to the study itself in Appendix 2, with earlier studies into the topic clearly motivated by Danish politicians' and administrators' opinion that "Denmark should not be lumped together with the real colonial powers" (p.391). The survey therefore not only charts the political decisions themselves, but places them into their historical and ideological contexts, with issues of national security and economic factors playing an important role in the decision making processes, but dominant Danish cultural perceptions towards Greenland also clearly significant.

The book's twelve chapters begin with an introduction to Greenland's history as a Danish colony, initiated by the Danish-Norwegian priest Hans Egede in 1721. The twin-goals of spiritual and economic 'improvement' for the native population, that have motivated colonization movements all over the world, led to the establishment of colonial sites such as trading, mission and hunting stations. Following the Treaty of Kiel in 1814, which assigned Greenland, along with the Faroe Islands and Iceland, to the Kingdom of Denmark, trading missions appeared in rising numbers. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the "Danish commitment in Greenland" (p.14) intensified, with provincial councils established to deal with administrative issues. Greenlanders had no right to vote in the Danish Parliament, with the Royal Greenland Trading Company (RGT), established in 1776, administering a trade monopoly that would allow the Greenlanders "to mature into social conditions that were more open and free" (p.17). However Danish sovereignty was vulnerable, and had to be repeatedly asserted towards Norway, Canada and the USA, ending with one landmark decision by the International Court at The Hague awarding Denmark sovereignty "over all of Greenland" (p. 20) as recently as 1933.

Set against this context, the Second World War (dealt with in Chapter 2), in particular, was a turning point in terms of Greenland's development and significance as part of Northern Europe. After Denmark's occupation

by German forces on 9 April 1940, Greenland became of strategic military interest within the North Atlantic. This is where a fundamental disagreement surfaced between the ‘neutral’ Danish government in Copenhagen, and the local Danish governors in Greenland. Without advising the former of his intentions, the latter, led by the ‘self-appointed’ representative of the Danish government Henrik Kauffmann, negotiated an agreement with the US Government to establish military defence bases in Greenland, in order to protect both the Greenlandic territory and to provide much needed access to the North Atlantic. The decisive nature of this “1941 Greenland Agreement” is further explored in Chapter 3, which charts the rise of Greenlandic desires for self-determination. In Chapters 4 and 5, this is then set against the international context of the decolonization process in the United Nations, which provided political and administrative frameworks and legal norms that dealt with the three key concepts of sovereignty, self-determination and dependence. The political processes that took place between Denmark and Greenland following World War II are surveyed in Chapter 6, with a new Greenlandic Commission appointed in 1948. The Commission considered the social and cultural conditions of Greenland society, in addition to dealing with the question of the political representation of Greenlanders in the Danish Parliament. Only five of the sixteen members were Greenlanders, and their visit to Greenland in the summer of 1949, together with only a small part of the Parliament’s Greenland Committee, was a short four weeks in length.

Chapters 7 to 9 chart the political processes and debates, both internal and external with the United Nations about the status of what are now called “non-self-governing territories” (colonies). Denmark’s position moved from claiming that Greenland was not a colony at all (as it was not being economically exploited by the Danish state) to a “creative interpretation” (p.246) of the international concept of what “full measure of self-government” means (p.246) – one of integration. This position was (and still is) based on four important Danish perceptions: that of Greenland’s society as being both socially and economically vulnerable, a perception that relates very closely to existing historical interests, links and consequent emotive agendas, but also on the third, more ideological construction of the nation and of the ‘imagined community’ (a term suggested by Benedict Anderson) that sustains it. The fourth, but perhaps most dominant, motive for the integration of Greenland as a Danish province, as part of a decolonization process, is the motive of the political actors advancing the agenda of the (Danish) nation state, both in terms of political and economic interests.

As a result, and although aware of the international anti-colonialism movement, as well as the UN Charter that offered opportunities for self-

government and independence (taken up, for example, by the Faroe Islands), Greenland's politicians negotiated on the basis of making them "an integral part of Denmark" (p.285). With this goal in mind, and with a great deal of political negotiation, the 'Greenland issue' was then advanced through the UN during 1953 and 1954 (Chapters 10, 11). Some international committee members commented on the lack of a referendum, which was normally required when integrating a colony with the metropolitan country. The majority however accepted "Denmark's view on the matter" (p.368).

Decolonisation has often been idealised as the undoing of colonialism. A struggle by the colonised people to rid themselves from being dominated by another nation and attain independence, either culturally or politically, through self-governance, of their territory. As this volume proves, nothing is ever that simple. Starting with the problematic definition of 'the people' of Greenland – are they a homogenous group, did they all have an opportunity to 'speak'? – the volume surveys not only the politics of a particular time, but also the attitudes and ideas of the colonisers. As such, it is a significant contribution to ongoing debates about either naturalised or imagined communities or nations, and shows the fragile and dynamic nature of post-war politics.

The reports contained in this volume provide detailed evidence of the role of Danish political and public opinion makers and actors who, with a potent mixture of nostalgia and paternalism towards the colonised territory, perceived the decolonisation processes with a sense of loss (of social and cultural influence), but also economic and political opportunity, and acted accordingly. They also illustrate the way in which Edward Said's 'orientalising' techniques of the prejudiced but powerful outsider can be transposed onto Greenland and other 'special areas' in the world (see 'the Arctic', for a current rescue fantasy). It foreshadows the contemporary relationship between Denmark and Greenland, with Denmark as a neo-colonialist administrator of the 'burden' that is Greenlandic social and economic development. This Danish perspective on what happened in Greenland between 1945 and 54, and the way in which Greenlanders were 'managed' (rather than offered real democratic participation) on the basis of the "naturally and quietly evolved relationship" (p. 358) with Denmark, can perhaps be best summarized in the handwritten note by Hermod Lannung, a member of the Danish UN delegation, written during the final conclusion of 'the Greenland Issue' at the UN:

"At this point we let the Greenlanders speak – very effective" (p.357, footnote, my emphasis).

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