JENS RAHBEK RASMUSSEN

When the Fleet was Stolen and the City burned down: the Bombardment of Copenhagen in 1807 and its consequences

At the beginning of 1807 Denmark could look back on one of the longest periods of peace in the country’s history. No-one could have imagined the catastrophe the year would bring. Admittedly, Britain and France were at war, as they had been, at intervals, for more than a hundred years. But that was exactly why over that period Denmark had had not just peace but also profit. Denmark stayed neutral, so while Britain, France, and their allies used up their resources on war, Danish ships could take over a significant proportion of European and world trade. Danish merchants and shipowners earned a great deal in those years.

It was generally expected that the good times would continue. A writer imagined early in the year that thirty years later Copenhagen would be embellished with new public buildings, including a new castle, the old one having burned down in 1794. In that castle would be built, among other things, a museum, which we know today as the National Museum. This was fulfilled – the museum got its home in a corner of the newly-built Christiansborg from 1832. But the vision of a peaceful and happy time until that day was, to say the least, not to be. Before 1807 was past, parts of the capital were a smoking ruin, and Denmark had lost its Navy.

WHEN DENMARK WAS MUCH BIGGER

In 1807 Copenhagen was the capital of not just the ”Kingdom of Denmark” but also of the much bigger Danish monarchy or “united monarchy” (helstat) as it was known. The Danish King was also king of Norway and of the Duchy of Schleswig-Holstein. Moreover he ruled Iceland, Greenland, and the Faeroes, and some tropical colonies, of which the most important were the Danish Virgin Islands in the West Indies.

More than half of the 2½ million people subject to the monarchy lived outside Denmark’s present borders. Many different languages were spoken, but two principally. One was Danish, also used in Norway (which at that time did not have its own written language), the North Atlantic colonies and parts of Schleswig. The other was German, particularly used in Schleswig-Holstein as well, but which prevailed among many officials, merchants, and intellectuals.

In order to counteract divisions in the multinational and multilingual state, the Government had in 1776 introduced a law on citizenship. This reserved all public positions in the Danish monarchy for those born within its borders, but didn’t distinguish between Danes, Norwegians, and Holsteiners. It did not deal with immigration at all, as its name suggests. If foreigners wanted to work or invest, they were welcome in the united Monarchy, and if they invested enough they got citizenship (and their children did too).

At that time patriotism was about a prince or king, who most often, as in the Danish monarchy, ruled over different peoples or what we today would call nations. A Norwegian might predominantly see himself as Norwegian rather than Danish, but at the same time be a subject of the Danish monarchy. After the dramatic events of 1801 and 1807 there came many Norwegian declarations of loyalty to the King and to the “whole state”, and in 1801 also patriotic poems in German.

THE BATTLE OF COPENHAGEN IN 1801 – A WARNING

In 1801, the Danes got a warning that there were limits to what neutral states could get away with in regard to the great powers. Denmark had for a long time provoked Britain by misusing neutrality, among other things by letting ships from France or Holland sail under the Danish flag. Moreover they let warships escort merchant ships in order to insist on the principle “a free ship carries free cargo”, ie that the big powers did not have the right to search cargo on neutral ships to see whether the rules were being broken (which they nevertheless sometimes did). On a couple of occasions shots were exchanged between British and Danish warships.

In 1800 Denmark joined the so-called League of Armed Neutrality, along with Sweden and Russia, upon which Britain sent a fleet to Copenhagen and demanded Denmark’s withdrawal from the League. But the Danish Government could not just do this. The League of Armed Neutrality was a Russian initiative, and Russia was Denmark’s “protecting power” which would help us if the Swedes tried to conquer Norway. So either it fought the British fleet, although everyone knew that was an impossible task, or risked reprisal from Russia.

Denmark chose to fight the British, and in the Battle of Copenhagen on 2 April 1801 a superior battle-ready British fleet under Admiral Horatio Nelson fought a stationary Danish defensive line made up of some forts and a series of anchored ships without masts or sails (known as "blockships"). The main Danish Navy stayed in its base on Holmen in Copenhagen. It would not be exposed, for without it the country's revenue-earning trade could not be protected.

Nelson faced determined Danish resistance, but the result was a given and he did not want bigger losses than necessary. So after four and a half hours' fighting he offered the Danes a ceasefire, but under the threat of continuing the battle, destroying the fleet, and bombarding Copenhagen. During the negotiations the news suddenly came that the Russian Czar had been murdered a week before the battle (news spread slowly then). The new Czar was, in contrast to his father, friendly to the English, so Denmark could now leave the League of Armed Neutrality peacefully. So the British had got what they wanted, Copenhagen had escaped bombardment, and we kept the fleet. For a few years.

PATRIOTISM AND RASHNESS

Before the Battle of Copenhagen songs were written to strengthen the will to resist. Some were anonymous mocking ballads ("Nelson with the one eye"), while others were written by well-known poets like Jens Baggesen. But it was especially after the Battle of Copenhagen that a wave of patriotism spread over the country. It was not least students, intellectuals, and poets who were seized by the mood. For them the ideas of love of fatherland, developed in the 18th century, had stood up to the test.

The problem was that in memory the battle began to be seen as a draw or even a Danish moral victory. So there was no fear, when a British fleet turned up in summer 1807. "Let them come and we'll give them a beating" was the general view. Schack Staffeldt, one of the greatest poets of the age, wrote a "Danish song" full of derision and mockery of the British. As time would show, this was a serious misjudgement of the situation. Britain and France were now in a life and death struggle and could no longer accept neutrality. Either you were with them, or against.

The Danes had a completely unrealistic confidence in their defence. A poem to "the fatherland's defenders" appealed to farmers to throw away their scythe, take up their sword, and show the British how they could fight. This was rather revealing. In reality the so-called "militia" consisted of poorly led and trained amateur soldiers, and in the only real battle outside Copenhagen, the "Battle of the Clogs" at Køge, they were confronted by professional, battle-ready British troops, who won an easy victory.

"LIKE A LOUSE BETWEEN TWO NAILS"

At the beginning of 1807 the French Emperor Napoleon dominated the European continent, while Britain, in contrast, was master at sea after Nelson's destruction of the French fleet at Trafalgar in 1805. In July however Russia unexpectedly made peace and entered an alliance with France. Soon there were rumours that the two powers would put pressure on neutral states, including Denmark, to get them to join Napoleon's so-called "Continental System". Indeed, the war was no longer just military, but also economic. The Continental System aimed to block any export of British goods to the Continent and thereby ruin the country, so it could no longer make war. In its turn Britain forbade neutrals to call at the blockaded ports.

Denmark wanted to stay neutral, but opinions were rather anti-French. Foreign Minister Christian Bernstorff saw Napoleon as a tyrant keeping European states in slavery. If the British were getting quite a different impression, it was because the Danes incessantly protested about their infringements of neutrality. The Danes saw these complaints as routine diplomatic protests. But the result was that the British began to see the Danes as "unfriendly" – maybe even tilting towards the French.

At the same time a British report said that the Danes had begun to arm their fleet. This was untrue, but the pressurized British Government did not dare take any chances. If the Danish Navy came under French control, it could block access to the Baltic. This would not just affect British exports, but also imports of goods which were vital for the fleet – hemp for rope and cordage, flax for sails, and iron for guns.

Moreover, British politicians feared that Napoleon and his allies had begun to doubt Britain's capacity and will to win the war. This could also explain why the Russian Czar Alexander had changed sides. One way of demonstrating energy was to get hold of the Danish warships by a commando action. In August a British fleet stood unchallenged in the Øresund, and 30,000 troops were landed.

Denmark now had a dilemma, for whichever great power it chose, or was forced to choose, the state was threatened with disintegration. If they went in with the French, British seapower would break the connection to Norway. Norway was dependent on corn imports and without them could starve, and fall into political and social chaos. If the Swedes attacked Norway, Denmark would be unable to send reinforcements. All this could be avoided by an alliance with the British, but then the French would occupy Schleswig-Holstein and Jutland.

In July 1807 France was seen as a bigger threat than England, partly because it was allied with Russia. So most of the Danish army was stationed on the southern border. The 30-40,000 soldiers could hardly have stopped a French attack. But their presence showed that Denmark was ready to defend its neutrality - and also who was seen as the most likely enemy.

Together with the army in Holstein were the mad King Christian VII and the country's real ruler, Crown Prince Frederik (later Frederick VI). After their landing in Sjælland a British envoy turned up in Kiel and presented the Danish Government with an ultimatum: either the Danish Navy was handed over the British, or they would simply take it. This is often presented as a quite unique and unprecedented demand. But other countries were faced with similar demands. A Russian fleet in the Mediterranean agreed to sail to Portsmouth and to stay there during the war. And, protected by British warships, the Portuguese fleet brought itself, the court, and the central administration in safety to the country's biggest and richest colony, Brazil.

The Danes rejected the British demand completely, and in August Crown Prince Frederik arrived in Copenhagen to organise the defence. He named as Supreme Commander the 72-year-old Ernst Peymann, who was without military experience, and then went back to the army in Holstein. This disappointed the Copenhageners deeply, for they had expected that he himself would lead the defence of the capital, as in 1801 – and as Frederik III had during the Swedish siege in 1658-9, a historic event that was still a living memory to the Copenhageners and was commemorated every year on 11 February, the day of the Swedish attack.

Militarily Denmark could do nothing against the British. The sea defences were certainly stronger than in 1801, and the British accordingly chose an attack from the land. In Copenhagen, supplies had been collected in case there was a longer siege. The commander of the British forces, Arthur Wellesley (later the Duke of Wellington), later asserted that he would have preferred a siege to a bombardment. It would hardly have been any more humane though, because in a siege many would die of hunger or deadly illness. When Danzig (Gdansk) was besieged for nearly a year in 1813, 17,000 people died of typhus. But in the end the British made up their minds to bombard the city to compel the fleet to be handed over.

THE BOMBARDMENT

On 2 September 2007, at half past seven in the evening, there began in Copenhagen – as an eyewitness wrote – "the most devastating bombardment, bombs, grenades, fireballs, Congreve's new rockets, and shells flew about our ears." A bomb came down in his family's house, where it exploded "with a horrible bang, blew the roof off, took the pavement up, and shattered about 900 panes of glass."

The horrors continued during the next nights, as is described in a long series of memoirs. The Congreve rockets spread particular terror, with their barbs sticking into woodwork and igniting it if not immediately extinguished. Many house-owners fled to Christianshavn or Amager, out of range, and so could not help to put out the fires. As a result, on the third night there developed between Nørrevold and Gammeltorv an inferno which the exhausted firemen could not handle. Finally fire took hold in Our Lady's Church tower. The copper roof began to melt, and at 4.45 in the morning on 5 September it happened: "I saw the tower sink into the tower walls, and from them, as from a huge chimney, no, as if from a volcano, arose a fountain of fire, blue and green from the copper. I shall never forget the sight."

That eyewitness was one Christian Jürgensen Thomsen. He would become the founder of the National Museum, which (as we saw above) would become a reality 25 years later. But in 1807 he was just 19, and as the son of a prosperous merchant he had during the siege joined up into a volunteer police body. He saw a butcher's assistant at his side have both legs shattered by a bomb, but himself escaped the bombardment without physical harm. His corps made a determined effort, with other volunteers, including students, the Life Guards, and sailors, a large and popular group in the naval city of Copenhagen.

Other units were however not worth much. About half the Marine Corps deserted. The defence was also weakened because the army and navy could not be united, and the Crown Prince's absence meant there was not the same patriotic cohesion as in 1801. It was a general opinion that the generals were in cahoots with the enemy. A priest later insisted in his memoirs that a British officer had shown him a map marking the poorer and the more prosperous parts of Copenhagen, and said that they had orders to fire at the poor parts. The Government knew about these critical opinions because it opened and read post from the capital.

After the third night of shelling and the fall of Our Lady's Church, General Peymann came under strong popular pressure for a ceasefire. 24 hours later, on the morning of 7 September, Copenhagen surrendered, though this too led to protests, notably from the sailors. The Crown Prince was furious, having sent an order that the city must not surrender, though it was intercepted by the British and never got through. Peymann and other officers were brought before a military court and condemned after a legally unsound trial, mostly because the Crown Prince wanted to calm Napoleon, who thought Denmark had given up too easily. Their punishments were however later reduced or forgiven.

The first reaction in Copenhagen was cautious. People were happy that the horrors had stopped, and the British soldiers behaved in a disciplined way and paid well. A Scottish regiment in kilts became a popular sightseeing excursion. But when the Copenhageners realized that the Fleet, the pride of the city and the country, was to be handed over, the mood changed. The "theft of the fleet" ensured the British were marked out as a nation of thieves – among the worst things that could be said about a people then. The poet Jens Baggesen wrote about "the British ship theft", and a songster, in a rhyme about "1807" spread the phrase "the Englishman, the cursed thief".

Dislike was to a large extent focused on the Crown Prince, even if tight censorship meant it could rarely be expressed. But there was also enmity against everything that was British or seemed to be. A group of American sailors were beaten up, although they tried to explain they were not British. Typically people happily believed in any false rumour, for example that George III or William Congreve had died.

THE WAR AGAINST ENGLAND

From 1807 until 1814 Denmark was allied with France and was at war with Britain. French and Spanish troops were sent to Jutland in 1808 with a view to an invasion of Skåne (Sweden was on the British side). The French were viewed badly, while the Spanish were popular: they liked children and ate the most notable Danish dishes without a murmur. But they froze so much, and therefore had so many fires in their quarters in Koldinghus that the castle burned down. It would not have happened if the fire brigade had not had left their posts because of the cold.

The attack on Skåne never came to anything. Moreover the British Navy successfully evacuated the Spanish and sailed them home so that they could take part in the national war of resistance against Napoleon. The British Navy dominated Danish waters. It attacked and destroyed the last remaining Danish ship of the line, "Prince Christian", when it tried to get home from Norway. So Denmark had to try a kind of guerrilla war at sea with small gunboats. These could manoeuvre even when there was no wind and thereby defeat much bigger British ships who could not move around. But these were just pinpricks. Through the whole war the British were able to come to and fro from the Baltic, especially by using the Great Belt, which had been carefully surveyed in 1801, instead of the narrow Øresund. Every other week a fleet of many hundred merchant ships, protected by warships, went through the Belt.

During the war 7000 Danes and xxxx Norwegians were taken prisoner and brought to prison ships around London. By the standards of the times they were reasonably well treated, and most were released after one or two years – even though some of them were captured again later and put back in prison. Denmark took in its turn a few British prisoners, and interned the British staying in Denmark when the war broke out.

For most of the war it was possible to supply Norway with food, but in 1809 and 1812-13 the British blockade meant starvation in many areas. This "year of need" was remembered for a long time, and Ibsen later depicted the desperate attempts to get food in his poem "Terje Vigen". In Norway people began to think about whether the country would be better off without the link to Denmark. But there was no widespread unhappiness, and it was the great Powers who, at the Peace of Kiel in 1814, decided that Norway should be part of a union (with common King and foreign policy) with Sweden.

In 1808-9 Finland, then part of Sweden, was conquered by Russia, then an ally of France. In 1812 the French broke that alliance and invaded Russia. Since Sweden was allied with the British, both Sweden and Russia ended up on the winning side, Sweden had to give up getting back Finland. The heir to the Swedish throne – who was Sweden's real ruler, although he only became King in 1818 – decided instead to go for getting Norway from Denmark, which had been on the losing side.

The Norwegians were not asked and had to accept the decision. When the Norwegian-Swedish union did not meet with particular resistance in Norway, it was because the country was freer than in the union with Denmark. It was decisive that in 1814 a power vacuum emerged with neither Denmark nor Sweden controlling the country militarily. As a result Norway succeeded in getting its (for its time very democratic) Constitution approved, and were allowed to keep it, despite Swedish unhappiness, when they went into the union.

For Denmark, war expenditure meant that the state had to carry out a monetary reform and liquidation of its obligations ("State bankruptcy") in order to fight runaway inflation. When at the same time Denmark lost its good Norwegian customer for its agricultural products, and the economic situation was overall bad after the war, Denmark experienced an economic crisis. In all of Europe after 1815 there was a mood rather similar to that after World War II: people were happy at the peace, but afraid that Europe, after its bloody civil war, would lose influence to other parts of the world like America and Asia.

CONSEQUENCES FOR DENMARK

In 1819 the poet B S Ingemann wrote a song to the Danish Flag to encourage the nation to great deeds, "Fly proudly over Kodan's waves" (ie the Baltic Sea). A later verse runs "Wave proudly over the Indian coast" where Denmark still had the colony Tranquebar. But within a hundred years the British and Americans had taken over the Danish tropical colonies, and profitable world trade was just a memory. The Danish Flag was less seen in ports, and Denmark became, in Poul Martin Møller's words, a "little, poor country". Keeping the fleet would not have made much difference. Peace in Europe stopped the colossal earnings which neutrality had produced in a short, hectic period of war.

Denmark would a few years later be involved in two wars with German powers. Their course had clear resemblances to 1801 and 1807. An apparent victory, leading to an unsustainable overestimation of their own strength, again leading to a catastrophic defeat. The war with the Schleswigers in 1848-51, which can also be described as a civil war within the Danish monarchy, was not won with military might, but because the great Powers chose to support Denmark. They did not do so when it came to a war with Prussia and Austria. The defeat in 1864 was just as catastrophic in its consequences as the one against Great Britain in 1807-14. Then Denmark lost Norway, this time Schleswig-Holstein.

The defeat in 1814 contributed to creating a Danish mentality that was remarkably unheroic. People praised the flat Danish landscape as a symbol of that little, but peaceful country, whose cohesion was based on social solidarity (Grundtvig's "Higher mountains as wide as the earth"; Oehlenschlager's national anthem "There is a lovely land"). People gradually forgot that Denmark had not always been a peaceful little country, and that there had been a "Danish Empire" for centuries before 1814.

The wars in 1848 and 1864 reignited short-term patriotism, and in another parallel to 1801 and 1807 the war's seriousness and the enemy's strength were underestimated. The defeat and the loss of Schleswig, including the Danish-speaking part, created a new feeling of catastrophe. Many feared that Denmark in the long run would not be able to survive as an independent country. The country had perhaps the ideal size as far as equality and cohesion were concerned, but in contrast its small size made it powerless in world politics. The focus was now on "Danishness", supplemented at times with Nordic cooperation, but there was a bitter mistrust of all the great Powers, including Britain, which had been thought to have let us down by not coming to help against Prussia in 1864.

Despite anti-German feelings the Danes did not immediately turn towards Britain. A Danish politician expressed the Danish opinion very precisely when he said, in a debate, of the British that "at least they don't hate us, but you have to say that the Germans do hate us". The question is therefore how long did we carry on hating Britain?

OPINIONS ABOUT ENGLAND

The historian E C Werlauff experienced both the British bombardment (aged 26) and the defeat by Germany in 1864 (aged 83). He insisted shortly before he died that hatred for Germany "is not as strong as the way we hated the British in those seven years [1807-1814]". This sounds remarkable today, for after Nazism and the German occupation the British became our friends and liberators, and the Germans the symbol of evil. But much shows that Werlauff was right.

In his memoirs the author Vilhelm Bergsøe says that his father in 1807 had been told by his father "never to forget this and never to give your hand to an Englishman". Once in the 1840s Bergsøe fought with a schoolfriend who came from the Danish West Indies and therefore (also) spoke English. Bergsøe called him a "damned thief" and was nearly expelled from school for it. He escaped because he persuaded his headmaster that at home he had never heard the word "Englishman" without that epithet.

When in 1906 an author called the 1864 defeat the worst catastrophe in Denmark's history, the economist Marcus Rubin, author of the main work about the period 1807-14, protested strongly. In his view 1807 had been significantly worse, but most people had forgotten it. Rubin was not aiming to get people to hate the British again. But if they had been able to forgive and forget what the British had done, they should be able to adopt the same pragmatic opinion about the Germans, accept the loss of Southern Jutland, and move on.

Rubin thought therefore that after 1900 people did not feel the same hostility to Britain as before. Many liberals, themselves admirers of British political and economic freedom, were nevertheless persuaded that most Danes were imprinted with the continental "office and barracks mentality", and neither liked or understood the business-minded British.

There are no opinion polls from that time. But German (and French) cultural influence was strongest for a long time, partly because so few Danes spoke English. Personal and cultural connections were also, despite political hostility, stronger with Germany than with Britain, and they were never completely broken, even after the Nazi takeover and the German occupation. From 1945, when Denmark was liberated by British troops, the Danes nevertheless became strongly Anglophile, and the earlier hostility was forgotten.

FROM 1807 TO 2001: THE FIRST TERROR BOMBARDMENT IN WORLD HISTORY?

There was comprehensive international criticism of the British attack on Copenhagen, among others from the US President Thomas Jefferson. This was partly on the grounds of international law – had Britain been justified in a preventive attack on a neutral country? – partly because of the large number of civilian victims.

As far as international law was concerned, the British often had 1807 quoted back to them by rivals and enemies, notably France and Germany. The British were themselves not particularly proud of the action, and during the First world War they went so far as to admit that the attack had been a regrettable but one-off breach of international law. But in fact earlier in 1807 they had carried out a similar (but unsuccessful) action against the Ottoman fleet in Istanbul. And in 1812 they landed in the USA and burned down parts of Washington, including the White House.

During the Second World War, comparisons with 1807 were made when the British sank the French Navy at Mers-el-Kebir in North Africa in 1940. The puppet Vichy Government in France had formal control over half of France, but the Germans had occupied the other. The British feared that the fleet would fall into German hands, and gave the French the same choice they had given the Danes in 1807, either to hand over the fleet or see it sunk. The French admiral rejected the demand, and the British sank his fleet with big losses.

The innovative way in which the bombardment of a city and its civilian population had taken place was also debated in a lively way. Rockets had been used in battle and siege for centuries, eg in India, where the British got to know them. But in 1807 a new type of rockets was used, called after their inventor William Congreve. They had barbs and could stick into wood and set fire to it.

Even though only 300 of them were fired (under the leadership of Congreve himself) they were responsible for the violence of the fire in the city and the consequent difficulty of putting it out. However they did not kill many people, in comparison with the 6000 traditional shells and grenades. The British politician, William Wilberforce, who in the same year was the man behind the abolition of the slave trade in the British Empire, found it positive that rockets damaged buildings rather than people

Today 1807 is often described as the “first terror bombardment of civilians in history”. That is an understandable but actually incorrect formulation. For centuries cities had been besieged and fired upon, often with huge civilian losses when they were stormed. In 1760 Dresden was subjected to a nine-day-long Prussian bombardment which became a European media event. Here too the attackers aimed at a church tower (the Kreuzkirche) which was shot down in flames. Although rockets were not used, people actively discussed the use of “unheard-of” and “unacceptable” new weapons. For the Prussian king Frederick the Great, as for the British, the attack’s ruthlessness was the most important thing, enabling him to ignore the humanitarian criticism of the 50 civilian casualties.

Copenhagen’s bombardment has to be seen in this context. There has been talk of the fiercest bombardment of a European city before the First World War. According to one British historian, each of the three nights saw the use of as much gunpowder as at the whole Battle of Waterloo! It looks fairly clear that the figure of 1600-2000 civilian victims, often mentioned in historical accounts, is a wild exaggeration. More recent research puts the figure closer to 200. But that was still ten times as many per day as in Dresden.

In certain respects it makes sense to see the Napoleonic wars as an early example of total war, for example waging of war by economic means and the mass call-up of soldiers. But in other areas it is more reasonable to see it, including 1807, as the culmination of pre-modern war. The reaction to the horrors led to a period of 100 years where war (in Europe) avoided civilians and was the business only of soldiers – just as the use of atomic weapons on Hiroshima and Nagasaki made the big powers avoid their use after the Second World War.

After 1945 Danes began to compare 1807 with the horrors of the war that had just ended. Copenhagen 1807 was “the 19th-century’s Warsaw” or “Denmark’s Guernica”. For the inhabitants at that time the experience of bombs and fire had hardly been less horrifying than for those who had been under air attack during World War II. The difference in explosive power and the number of victims is irrelevant. But the comparisons can be seen as a slightly tasteless attempt to get Denmark, which had got through the war fairly lightly, to present itself as the first, now unjustifiably forgotten, victim of a terror bombardment.

Even the attack on the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001 was the occasion for comparisons with 1807. A common feature was that people reacted surprisingly calmly and without panic to an unexpected catastrophe which they could not avoid. This feature was often noted in 1807, and it has been pointed out that both death and fire were then more daily phenomena, and integrated into a world view where God’s punishment could strike anyone at any time. But the reaction was the same among supposedly materialistic New Yorkers, for whom the attack was an event which (in contrast to Copenhagen’s bombardment) must literally have been beyond their imagination.

Another common feature was that there were created iconic pictures of the city’s symbol, its highest building, consumed in flames. In New York it happened as TV pictures going straightaway around the world. In Copenhagen Eckersberg’s and C A Lorenzen’s paintings formed the basis for prints which long adorned Danish homes and recalled both the horrors themselves and the enemy who had caused them. Looking again at the pictures kept hatred for the British alive.

The collective stereotypes which came into use after 11 September (“all Muslims are terrorists”) can be reminiscent of what the British could be exposed to in Denmark in the years after 1807. The point is that we no longer think of the British like this. The cautiously optimistic conclusion to be drawn from Anglo-Danish relations over two centuries is that enmity can certainly be long remembered and inherited, but also that inherited enmities can be forgotten.

Translation into English

By David Frost, British Ambassador in Copenhagen