

## INTRODUCTION

There was a point early in 2012 when it felt as if you couldn't open a British newspaper or magazine without reading something about Denmark. We read that the Danes are the happiest people in the world – the UN said so. There were paeans to BBC4's cult Danish dramas – not just *The Killing*, but *Borgen* and *The Bridge*, which was watched by over a million people in Britain. There were interviews with Helle Thorning-Schmidt, Denmark's first female prime minister, and reams of writing about Noma, named the world's best restaurant for the third year in a row. For the first half of 2012, the Danes were the presidents of the EU, which gave them even greater exposure. We heard eulogies to their utopian welfare state, their unrivalled cycling culture and their commitment to environmentalism. Some of us remembered Denmark for the Muhammed cartoons crisis of 2006. The rest of us donned as many layers as we could of Danish knitwear. In short, Scandi fever – or perhaps more accurately,

Danish delirium – gripped the nation. Or parts of it, anyway.

In one sense, *How to be Danish* is yet another drop in the deluge. In another, it's an attempt to connect the dots between some of the different puddles. Part reportage, part travelogue, it can't be the definitive book about Danish life. But using shows like *The Killing* as a starting point, it will hopefully provide a wider context to the bits of Denmark that over the past few years have intrigued some of us in Britain – an accessible panorama of contemporary Danish life, written from an English perspective. In spring 2012, I spent a month in Denmark, travelling from the cycling lanes of Copenhagen to the windmills of west Jutland. I visited the set of *The Killing*, the test labs of the New Nordic kitchen and the place that's said to be the happiest town in the world. I poked around mosques and schools, churches and farms – and a remote little island where some grizzled farmers have created the world's most unlikely eco-haven. I interviewed over 70 Danes – most of them fascinating, a few of them dull; many of them in the public eye, but some not. I bounced from actors to designers, chefs to architects, journalists, politicians, students, imams, refugees – feeling my way as I went. I met the people who created Sarah Lund, the man who founded Noma, and the woman who knitted *that* jumper. This book is a stab at creating a narrative from some of those encounters. It is not – in case anyone has read too much into the title – a serious tutorial on how, actually, to be Danish. Most countries are impenetrable to outsiders,

but some – like, perhaps, America – have a national identity that is at least semi-permeable to newcomers. Denmark is not yet one of them.

Four per cent of Danes are called Larsen. According to some estimates, just 3% are Muslim: it is still a fairly homogenous country. For reasons that will hopefully become clear in later chapters, Danishness is still something that can only really be achieved through a Danish upbringing – and definitely not from a short book like this. It's a small place, Denmark. Many Danish micro-worlds bleed into others, and as a result it is hard to construct a thread about the country within clearly compartmentalised chapters. I've written eight. While each one is rooted in a single theme – respectively: education, food, design, politics, identity, Copenhagen, television, Jutland – they all often meander into other realms. The politics chapter begins with a discussion about the Danish language, but stick with it. The section on Copenhagen is also the story of Danish bicycles and architecture. Knitting creeps into the strand about television. The last chapter kicks off in Jutland, with some teenagers pissing against a wall, but ends up talking about windmills. All of them, though, can be read on their own. *God fornøjelse!*

## 1. WORK WELL, PLAY WELL: a Scandinavian education

"Everyone has to take part" – Else Mathiasen

It could be any old school disco. In the sports hall, the cool kids bounce around to loud music. In the playground, the shy ones look at their shoes, shivering. At some point, a young woman wrapped in an inflatable orange tube bursts from the sports hall and pinballs across the playground, aiming a large yellow water gun at all those who cross her path. This is the end-of-year party at Ingrid Jespersen High School – theme: "beach"; weather: Danish – but not all of those present share their classmate's exuberance. It's a cold night, and perhaps they regret obeying the Hawaiian dress code with quite such diligence.

Some feet away in the sports hall, a few hundred other sixth-formers are having a better time of it. Ringed with garlands of fake flowers, they bump to Rihanna, and Danish

artists like Kidd and Malk de Koijn. Every so often they'll thrust their way towards the makeshift bar where their teachers – known, like all Danish teachers, by their first names – happily hand out pints of beer. In the corners, couples make out. People are merry, but not blotto. In a last hurrah before next week's exams, most of them are having fun. Still, something makes me anxious. First up, I feel like I've been here before. Second: I keep thinking that something unspeakably evil is about to happen.

In a way, I'm partly right. I have been here before – at least, I've seen this place on screen. It's the playground where they filmed the school scenes from the first season of *The Killing*. Much of the plot of the first few episodes revolves around what happens one night at a school disco – a disco, slightly disconcertingly, that is rather like this one. At first, you think a girl's been kidnapped at the party. Then you think she's been murdered in the basement. Finally, you suspect someone else has been raped – or, at the very least, filmed having group sex. I look around. Where's the camera? Where's the basement? Who's the killer? But these aren't the only questions I'm wrestling with. I came here tonight fascinated mostly by the school's connections to Danish television. I've ended up just as intrigued by what the school says about the Danish education system, and, in fact, Denmark itself.

In a way, Ingrid Jespersen is not very representative of Denmark at all. It's quite elitist, in fact. It's a private school, it's in a posh bit of Copenhagen and the offspring of three

very different, very high-profile politicians all go here – the daughter of the social democratic prime minister; the daughter of the leader of the Danish Lib Dems; and the grandchild of Pia Kjaersgaard, the one-time leader of – for want of a better comparison – the Danish equivalent of the BNP.

But as Rihanna throbs away in the background, one thing fascinates me. If this is a private school, why does the government subsidise around 80% of the school fees?

It's sometimes claimed that Denmark is a classless society. While this is obviously a sizeable exaggeration – as the fictional prime minister in *Borgen* says, "It's a myth that we're all equal" – a lot of the state apparatus is nevertheless tilted towards lessening social divisions. The subsidy for private education is a good example of this. It's given to all those who want to study privately in Denmark, and accordingly it shows you both how large the Danish state is – and how committed that state is to creating equality. True, the students at Ingrid Jespersen come, on the whole, from wealthier backgrounds than their counterparts at Danish state schools. But they also represent a far wider social range than those at an equivalent private school in Britain. Twelve hours before the disco got going, I spent the morning interviewing a class that was at the end of their second year of three at Ingrid Jespersen. Put your hands up, I said, if you would struggle to come here without the subsidy. Around half the class did – which tells its own story. "If my parents

had to pay for everything at this school, I couldn't afford to come," says one, an 18-year-old called Rasmus. Like many youngsters in Denmark, he speaks very precise, almost flawless English. "We don't have that money. The state covers most of the expenses." Naturally, places like this are still seen as elitist – but they don't have quite the same stigma that they do in Britain, and they're much more mixed.

The knock-on effect is that as a group the students are more grounded and more socially conscious than you'd expect their British equivalents to be. A while back, Class 2B went on an exchange to a private school in Scotland, which shall remain nameless. Put simply, they were shocked at the social divisions they came across there. "In Scotland, they mentioned 'working class'," remembers Rasmus, sitting next to a shelf of test tubes. "In Denmark, of course we have that, but the difference is not very great. You can go from working class to upper class if you get a good job. And if you get an education you should be able to get a good job." It also helps that the wage disparity between different jobs is not particularly large, which means that Danes are less snooty about what jobs people do. "I don't look down upon any specific jobs," says Rasmus. "If you left school at 16 and became a garbage man, it might pay almost as good as a doctor. It's not easy, but you can do it." Again, this is an exaggeration – but the broad gist is correct. Thanks to the strength of the Danish trade unions, a doctor earns on average only twice as much as a refuse collector, a judge only two and a half times more than a cleaner. According to the Gini index, which measures

income disparity, the gap between rich and poor in Denmark is currently the lowest in the world.

It's important not to read too much into what one class of Danes thought of one class of Scots (and it would be amusing to hear what the Scots thought of the Danes) but their thoughts are useful in that they hint at what's different about Danish education, and, by extension, Danish society.

"When you compare us to other EU countries, our education is very badly rated," says 17-year-old Augusta. "We're not brought up to learn things by heart. But if you ask Danish students and Danish children about politics, we're more reflective. We have more of our own views. We think more about our society. We sensed in Scotland that they are taught in a more old-fashioned way."

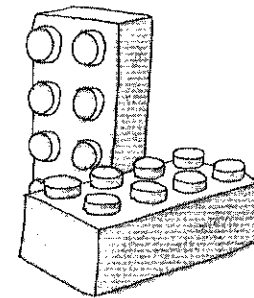
You could argue that this approach starts from the age of six months. At this point in a Danish child's life, state-subsidised childcare kicks in – which means that parents pay no more than 25% of the cost of sending their child to nursery (around £300 a month). If they're low earners, they pay far less – and in turn this means that everyone can and does put their children in childcare from an early age. This has two main effects. It encourages the vast majority of women to go back to work. Over 70% of Danish mothers are in work – in Britain, that figure falls to 55%. Second, it means that children from the age of six months are a) separated from their parents for large parts of the day; and b) surrounded by kids of all backgrounds.

There are many criticisms of these nurseries; one com-

mon view is that the education they provide is not structured enough. But their many supporters argue that they teach Danish children to be more independent, and, by introducing them to other people from all walks of life, they also make them aware of the importance of society, and of cooperating with your equals – a recurrent theme in Denmark, and, in fact, this book. Only in Denmark could there be a board game – Konsensus – based around the concept of collaboration. It's no coincidence that the name of the Danes' most famous export – Lego toys – is derived from the Danish words "leg godt". Play well.

This focus on independence extends outside the school gates, too. Since cycling and cycling infrastructure are so widespread, children are often allowed to roam around town at a younger age than they might do abroad. "Our parents don't have to drive us," says Søren, a chap with the beginnings of some lengthy dreadlocks. "We take care of our

own transportation from an early age. We don't have to have a driving licence to get around. At ten or 11, you can go to a lot of places yourself on your bike. It's normal to do it at nine." A quarter of children aged between seven and 14 have part-time jobs.



Teenagers can also get their hands on alcohol much more easily – and in fact they drink more alcohol per capita than youngsters in any other country. You can buy booze as early as 16, and people aren't prompted for their ID as often as they are in other countries. Meanwhile parents often give their 14-year-olds cans of beer to take to a party – an attempt to moderate their drinking without banning it completely. Opinion is divided as to the effect this all has. Predictably some think it encourages bingeing; others argue the opposite – that it makes alcohol less of an issue. "I think we drink differently to how they do in the UK," argues Benedicte, 17. "The people going out there – they were drunk. They were REALLY drunk. We tend to just get tipsy." Some of her classmates argue that the class's attitude to bingeing is unusual. But most of them claim it's standard for Danes their age – that while Danish teens drink more often, they usually do it in moderation, and in less pressurised circumstances.

In a year or two, this class will start to think about university. The decision they face is different from that faced by students in Britain. Here, there has been a fierce debate about whether the rise in university fees from £9000 to £27,000 will prove off-putting to those from poorer backgrounds. In Denmark, that premise seems farcical. University education is entirely free. In fact, Danish students are in a sense paid to go to university: they receive around £500 a month in living expenses. It's a different mentality. Students aren't seen as a burden on the state, but as people whose

skills will one day support it. They're future participants in Danish life, and they're treated as such. Every effort is made to make them better able to participate.

In Denmark, a well-rounded personality is seen as a key component of this ability to participate, which helps explain the existence of two very Danish institutions that have few overseas equivalents: the continuation school, and the folk high school. The former is the state-subsidised boarding school where many 16-year-olds go to study in the year before they leave for sixth form. They follow a basic academic curriculum, but the main focus is on creativity. Some continuation schools specialise in sport, others centre on drama and art, and some are essentially music schools. Their sole goals are to develop the students' extra-curricular interests, and to help them – at a pivotal moment in their lives – mature as human beings. The folk high school is a very similar concept, but it's aimed at those who have already left school – adults of any age, in fact – and there are no exams.

"It's part of this Danish tradition that everyone has to take part in political life, or in life in general," says Else Mathiassen, who runs the West Jutland folk high school. "Each individual should be developed in his or her own way – but also know how to function within a group. And to do that, you need to be enlightened! You have to be personally enlightened in order to know about society today. To enable you to be part of the democracy that we have."

It's easy to be cynical about such idealism. As the

fictional leader of the Social Democrats admits in *Borgen*: “People don’t run anything.” But walking around the grounds of the high school, you can see why Else’s so inspired. We’re halfway up the coast of the North Sea – as far from Copenhagen as you can really get in Denmark – and the place is dreamy. At its centre is an airy hub of bedrooms and workshops that open out onto acres of gardens and woodland. A blue tit flutters about the art studio, and the vegetable patches are stuffed with potatoes and lemon balm. In the woods in the distance, sculptures made by recent students poke from the trees. The whole estate smells of spring.

There are 70 of these places in Denmark, and one in ten Danish adults – with half of their fees paid for by the state – will spend a spell at one at some point in their lives. Most people tend to come in their twenties, but parents and pensioners often enrol too. In fact, the schools hold such a special place in the Danish identity that Else thinks that the very elderly sometimes come here to pass away. “Sometimes older people die here, and I have to ring up the family to break them the news,” she explains. “Often they’ll say: ‘Oh, that’s nice, he obviously wanted to die in a folk high school.’” Each school has its own specialism – West Jutland is particularly known for its focus on eco-living – but all of them will teach dancing, writing, ceramics, painting, acting, cooking, gardening, debating and philosophy. The last two are particularly important because the ability to articulate an argument is a key part of being an active citizen.

This highly democratic approach to education is not a recent Danish phenomenon. It can be seen in the context of a wider drive towards social democracy that began in Denmark around 150 years ago. The roots of Danish educational ideology, like many Danish concepts, can be traced to the mid-1800s, when the country was in the process of losing much of its southern (and historically German) territory to a newly belligerent Prussia. In 1864, Denmark finally surrendered its two southernmost provinces, Schleswig and Holstein, to Prussia, a defeat which saw the country lose 40% of its population. It was a moment of huge national trauma. Until that point, Denmark still rather optimistically saw itself as a relatively powerful, multinational commonwealth,



Nikolai Grundtvig

despite having regularly lost large parts of its empire since the 1500s. But in 1864, with the loss of their last significant annex, the Danes had finally to accept that their once-vast medieval empire – a Baltic sprawl that had housed several states and a babble of languages – was in fact now just one single, tiny monoculture. This prompted a national identity crisis, and forced Danes to reassess the values that united them.

The debate was heavily influenced by the ideas of a man called Nikolai Grundtvig, who is now considered a Danish national hero. By the late 1840s, Denmark had finally made the transition from absolute monarchy to parliamentary monarchy. In very simplistic terms, Grundtvig – a priest, thinker, and sometime politician active from the 1830s onwards – felt that the new democratic system would work only if every Dane was able to participate in political life, and if, by extension, Danish society was made more egalitarian. From 1838, as the campaign for democracy gathered pace, he gave a series of lectures promoting the concept of what he coined *folkelighed*, or what the historian Knud Jespersen translates as a “mutually committed community”. Grundtvig, writes Jespersen in his highly recommended *A History of Denmark*, “was particularly concerned with the question of how to transform the hitherto inarticulate general public into responsible citizens in the coming democracy – in other words, to turn the humble subjects of the king into good democrats”.

His arguments had a huge effect. “In virtually every area

imaginable,” says Jespersen, “the ideas developed by Grundtvig and his circle at a particular historical point in the middle of the nineteenth century have left a deep and long-lasting impression on the Danish psyche and on the way in which Danish society operates today. This is not necessarily because any of these ideas were in themselves especially original, but because at a critical crossroads in the history of Denmark, he was able to formulate his thoughts in such ways as to create a great impact and a comprehensive programme of action able to change the humble subjects or an absolute monarch into more mature members of a democratic society and at the same time unite the inhabitants of the remains of the Oldenburg state [the once mighty Danish empire] as one people, a Danish nation. The key concepts in this were *folkelighed*, tolerance, openness and liberal-mindedness: the means were enlightenment and committed dialogue.”

Indeed, Grundtvig was (and is) so revered in Denmark that when he died, a whole new suburb of Copenhagen, with a gargantuan church at its centre, was designed in his honour. The church (built, as it happens, by the father of Kaare Klint, whom we will meet in two chapters’ time, and filled with chairs by Klint himself) is quite a shock at first sight. You reach it by winding through several quiet residential terraces before – bam! – you’re hit by this vast juke-box of a building, a triangular man-made cliff-face that is three or four times the height of its po-faced neighbours.

Grundtvig’s first practical aim was to give all Danes



access to a thorough, humanist education, particularly in isolated areas traditionally ignored by the Copenhagen elite. Thus Grundtvig set about founding what became known as folk high schools – liberal arts colleges for the rural poor that now survive in the more arts-focussed form described above.

“The goal,” writes Jespersen, “was to offer young people the chance to stay in a school during the winter, where inspirational teachers and the living word could awaken their dormant spirit and sharpen their perceptions. In short the intent was no less than to transform the inarticulate masses into responsible and articulate citizens in the new democratic society which was slowly taking shape.”

The first folk high school was built in 1844 in a village in south Jutland. By 1864, there were 14 – and in 1874 there were 50. Now there are 70.

As Denmark sought to redefine itself in the years following 1864, concepts like the folk high schools and *folkelighed* began to take root in the Danish psyche. Danish farmers and dairymen – many of whom went to a folk high school and had consequently been imbued with a sense of both their own worth and their responsibility to society – clubbed together to form agrarian cooperatives that shared expensive materials, machinery and profits. For the first time in Danish history, these co-ops – inspired by a system pioneered by some weavers in Rochdale, Yorkshire – enabled the farmers to create meat and dairy products that were of a standard consistent enough to be exported. In time,

Denmark’s farming community became not only one of the world’s most prolific producers of bacon and butter (think: Lurpak), but also the foundation stone for the massive welfare state that gradually emerged in Denmark from the late 19th century onwards.

The folk high schools moved towards a more arts-based curriculum during the 60s, but their presence is testament to the enduring legacy of Grundtvig. Today, 75 students are enrolled at West Jutland – the school’s biggest cohort ever. Else puts this down to the fact that the financial crisis has turned people from consumerism towards more wholesome activities. “People are starting to think in a more old-fashioned way,” she explains. “They realise there are other ways of living, that it’s not all about making money.” But the crisis has also had a more negative effect. The government has cut some of its funding for the folk high schools, which means that students receive a slightly smaller subsidy. In turn, this makes it harder for poorer Danes to attend – it still costs around £120 a week – and so reduces the school’s role as a social leveler.

Another problem is that folk high schools attract very few immigrants. The relationship between so-called



The Højskole (folk high school) logo

indigenous Danes and those whose families arrived only in the last three decades is often vexed. It reached its nadir during the Muhammed cartoons crisis of 2006, when a Danish newspaper published pictures that portrayed the Muslim prophet as a terrorist – sparking protests across the Arab world. How to foster integration is a constant source of debate in Denmark – and for her part, Else thinks it could be partly achieved if more so-called New Danes studied at schools like hers.

“Unfortunately, there are almost no immigrants here,” she says. “It’s a shame. It’s a pity. I have been trying to get some to come. I think immigrants are brought up in this tradition that if you go to a school, you should end up with a paper so you can become a lawyer or a doctor. Here you end up with nothing! But I would love them to come here because they would know much more about Danish culture. If they came here, where you live together and eat together, they would so quickly learn how Danish people think.”

But how *do* Danes think? They’re a people deeply committed to cooperation and equality – and yet their third largest political party is from the far right. Their national hero preached tolerance – and yet it is the country that spawned the Muhammed cartoons. They’re sometimes called the Latinos of Scandinavia – but drunk pedestrians will still wait patiently for a green man at four in the morning. Danes certainly aren’t the warlike Viking progeny some Britons vaguely imagine them to be. But their values – and their character – are more complex than they first appear.

## 2. RAMSONS & SEAWEED: the Nordic food revolution

“I felt that there was a relation between the lack of love or care, and the terrible food in Denmark. And in France I saw the opposite – an abundance of love and generosity, and taste and smell and great meals...” – Claus Meyer

Lars Williams stands at the stove and fries a chunk of mould. Every so often, the kitchen heaves to one side. We’re on a houseboat in the Copenhagen harbour, and the occasional waves make cooking difficult. When winter comes, the days will be dark and short – but at least the kitchen won’t roll in the frozen sea. After some minutes, Lars takes the fried mould from the frying pan and places it on a plate. From a box, he plucks a large, dead insect, and pops it on top – fried barley mould, served with grasshopper. “Breakfast,” he says, and hands it to me.

It’s no ordinary breakfast, but then this is no ordinary