

# THE SORØ SCHOOL OF POETS 1825-1850

BY FLEMMING CONRAD

In Danish literary scholarship it is usual to characterise a group of poets, authors and literary critics living in the town of Sorø in the first half of the 19th century by referring to them as the "Sorø School" or the "Soronians" (Soranerne). This tradition can be traced back to the controversial literary critic P.L. Møller, who published an article entitled "A Visit to Sorø" in his periodical *Gæa* in 1846. A few years later, we find the Sorø poets treated as a group in a history of Danish literature intended for primary schools.<sup>1</sup> This custom in literary history indicates of course that it is thought possible to talk of a specific literary group in this small provincial town, or, expressed differently: It means – or should mean – that these poets and men of letters are grouped together not only by their status as citizens of the same town, but also because they are considered to have something in common from a literary point of view.

It is remarkable, however, that it is at all possible to talk of a literary centre outside Copenhagen at this time. In a former age it might have been more natural: From the Middle Ages until about 1700, Copenhagen was certainly not the seat of literary schools or circles. On the contrary, it is to a certain extent possible to talk about literary groups and organised literary activities among the landed gentry and at the grammar schools and monasteries throughout the country. And Sorø was among the foremost of these, as a Benedictine monastery was founded there about 1150. Later, in 1623, a Royal Academy for young noblemen was established there, continuing in existence until about 1800. On the basis of this, it is clear that there had been institutions of secular scholarship in Sorø for between two and three hundred years. Among the teaching staff, especially during the second half of the 18th century, we find some remarkable men of letters who are still important names in Danish literary history.

From about 1700, however, this picture began to change as Danish literary life became increasingly concentrated in Copenhagen. A permanent theatre was established there in 1722, closed down again a

few years later, but re-established in 1747 on the initiative of King Frederik V. In 1770 King Christian VII took it over and provided financial backing for it, after which it was given the name of The Royal Theatre. In 1759 a literary academy was founded there with the aim of furthering good taste in language and literature by arranging literary competitions and publishing the best contributions. The initiative was also supported by the Court.

The consequence of this concentration of academic and literary life in the capital was, of course, that it was in these surroundings that young budding writers had their first lessons. Here, the first critical journals were published, and here, too, Danish literary criticism came into being. If you wanted to live as a man of letters – and in Denmark the professional writer is a product of the 18th century – it was henceforth necessary to reside in Copenhagen. To leave the circles in the capital meant isolation in a provincial town or out in the country, very often in a parsonage. No literary circles could be expected there. For a few decades in the 19th century, from about 1825 to 1850, however, Sorø was the exception that proved the rule. Why? And how?

The academy for young noblemen closed in 1794, and a final end was put to the undertaking when its buildings were destroyed by fire in 1813. However, a few years later it was decided to re-establish the institution, this time in a new form. From now on, the Academy was to be an educational establishment not only for the nobility, but also for the official class and the respectable part of the middle classes. The ultimate objective was to provide a general or liberal education by teaching not only traditional secular subjects such as Latin, Greek, philosophy etc., but also Danish, German, French and English language and literature. Compared with the traditional study of divinity and law at Copenhagen University, the curriculum of the new Academy was an extremely modern one. In particular it marked an era when Danish language and literature became subjects taught at this level of education. Although the Acad-

emy was not intended to be a complete university, it aimed – like the basic or preliminary course at Copenhagen University – to provide students with an elementary knowledge of the humanities.

The Academy was opened in the autumn of 1826 and remained in existence until 1849, when the institution was finally closed down. The teaching staff were remarkably young. Among the older members we find the author B. S. Ingemann teaching Danish; he was born in 1789 and was consequently in his mid-thirties. Among the younger teachers we find the classical scholar Christian Wilster, who was born in 1797 and only 25 years old when appointed a teacher of Greek and English. It was the intention of the government that a post at the Academy should enable the holder to devote himself to literature. It was also mooted that a post at the Academy might be a jumping-off ground for a career at the University. In point of fact, however, most of the teachers remained at Sorø as long as the Academy existed – or until death put an end to their careers. This means that during the few decades forming the most important period of the Danish Golden Age, we find a circle of writers in this small, isolated provincial town of Sorø. It consisted of people born during the last decades of the 18th century – and they constituted the second generation of the Romantic movement (the generation after Oehlenschläger), the flower of the Golden Age.

It would be quite incorrect to maintain that these poets, authors and literary critics at Sorø formed a united and homogeneous school in every respect. On the contrary, the hostility between some of the Soranians is only too evident, and some of them actually tried to avoid meeting each other in the streets of the small town. (And it was indeed very small: In 1801 the population numbered 592, and in 1850 it had grown to 901). But in spite of certain internal conflicts, the Soranians mostly appear as a unified group, and it is a fact that several important details in the picture of the Danish Golden Age in literature are due to initiatives and activities at Sorø. The following represents a few of them – but makes no claim to completeness.

First, there is the important part played by the Sorø writers when the modern notion of a “national”

literature was introduced into Denmark. They made an active contribution to this, both in theory and in practice. As a literary scholar, B. S. Ingemann delivered his lectures, to which he gave the overall title of “Danish National Literature”, at the Academy between 1826 and the late 1840s. The very expression and the concept of “national literature” had been imported from Germany a few years earlier, probably in 1814, but Ingemann’s course of lectures is the first notable project in Denmark to use this term. At the same time, while literary critics were keen to point out the specifically Danish features of contemporary writing, B. S. Ingemann was trying to interpret the literature of the past as the crucial evidence of the evolution of a specifically Danish identity. This implies that an aesthetic standard of value was being replaced by a national one. It means, moreover, that the literary historian above all will take an interest in those aspects of domestic literature which seem valuable from this point of view. Finally, it means that the historical evolution of literature has been given a new objective or aim, which is the development of a national spirit or character. The Germans would talk of “Nationalgeist” in this context. This concept formed the basis of Danish literary histories for several generations and was given strong emphasis in literary histories written for use in grammar schools, where the mother tongue and the national literature together with Danish history very soon became the most important subjects. The first major step in this direction, however, was taken at Sorø Academy.

In his capacity as a poet, Ingemann also made his contribution to the national education of his country. Several years before moving to Sorø, he had already created a sensation as a poet in Copenhagen. His lyrical poetry as well as a considerable number of sentimental, rhetorical dramas of a Christian and idealistic nature had made him into a public favourite, but they had at the same time given rise to severe criticism. Among his sternest critics was Peter Hjort, who later became his colleague as a lecturer in German philology at Sorø. Hjort was a lifelong antagonist of Ingemann, and the poet always tried to avoid him.

After he had settled in Sorø, Ingemann’s writings took a new turn when he began writing historical novels. It was a new genre in Denmark, influenced, of

course, by the *Waverley Novels* of Sir Walter Scott, which became the great literary event of the 1820s and enjoyed popular favour throughout the remainder of the 19th century.

Above all, Ingemann was inspired by Scott’s medieval romances (such as *Ivanhoe*), but as a writer of historical novels he differs from Scott. While the *Waverley* novels can be described as realistic stories relating to the history of civilisation, Ingemann’s novels are rather in the nature of devotional literature with a Christian and national message. It is characteristic of his position that in a letter dated 10 September 1822 to a German fellow-poet, Ludwig Tieck, Ingemann praises Scott’s literary craftsmanship, while at the same time deploring his lack of a great “universal idea” (in German: “eine durchgehende grosse Totalidee”). In this, Ingemann agrees with Adam Oehlenschläger and other contemporary Danish poets and critics who search in vain for “idealistic enthusiasm” in Scott.

Ingemann’s novels were published between 1824 and 1836, four in prose and two in verse. They deal with a glorious, but also critical period in the Danish Middle Ages from about 1150 to 1400, the Age of the Valdemars, so called after some of the most famous kings of the period.

The opening of the first metrical novel, the story of *King Waldemar the Great and His Men* (*Waldemardens Store og hans Mænd*, 1824) formulates the programme of Ingemann’s overall project: The heroes of the past are exhorted to rise from their tombs to tell of their degradation and their salvation so that posterity might learn from it. For what Ingemann is aiming at is “the salvation of Denmark in the hour of need” (“Danmarks Frelse i Nødens Tid”). It must be remembered that Denmark had been at war with Great Britain in 1801 and 1807-14, with the tragic consequence that the Danish king had lost both his navy and the whole of Norway. Within the space of a few years, the Kingdom of Denmark had gone from a multi-national state of considerable size and importance to a relatively small and poor country.

Accordingly, the starting point of Ingemann’s novels is always a national crisis such as a civil war, a conflict between pretenders to the throne, or the hostile occupation of the country. The way out of this misfortune is, according to Ingemann, that at the

head of his united people the king should realise what is God’s will with this particular king and people, and that he accordingly should do the will of God.

In this way, Ingemann’s novels end in harmony and happiness, which is by no means the same as military dominance of other peoples or countries. Ambitions of this kind are foreign to God’s plan for Denmark and the Danes.

The novel translated into English as *Waldemar, surnamed Seir or the Victor* (Valdemar Seier, 1826) is a good example of this. We are in the year 1219, after the victorious campaign in Estonia which has become so famous because tradition has it that in the midst of the battle the Danish colours, the so-called “Dannebrog”, suddenly appeared out of heaven and turned the fortune of war in favour of the Danes.

During the subsequent victory celebrations at the royal castle, an old bishop steps forward to present the king with the manuscript of the famous history of the Danes, *Gesta Danorum* written by Saxo Grammaticus about 1200. The following passage is taken from the 1841 English translation of Ingemann’s novel (“By a Lady” i.e. J. F. Chapman):

“Thou hast reached the zenith of thy glory: it is manifest before all men that the Lord is with thee, and the land of thy fathers. In such an hour did I promise to lay before thee this important volume; it is the legacy of old Father Saxo to thee and to Denmark: it is a faithful record of the deeds of thy mighty ancestors and the people. Therein mayest thou see, as in a mirror, what became of all the great ones of the earth, who sought their own glory rather than the glory of the Lord, and forfeited the salvation of their souls to gain the applause of fools.

[...]

The hour of blessing and grace is indeed come, my Liege; but that grace may not turn to vengeance, and blessing to cursing, think of what you promised me in that night of confusion and despair [i.e. during the critical phase of the battle in Estonia]. Forget not, in your triumphs, that the same hand that lifted up can cast down, and that ‘the Lord resisteth the proud but giveth grace to the humble.’ [...].” (p.119-120)

The ambitious king is much too proud to understand the old bishop's warning until he is beaten militarily by his enemies - the princes of northern Germany. The passage is interesting, however, because in warning the king by presenting him with a book, the old bishop forms a parallel to Ingemann himself: He, too, wanted to teach his contemporaries by means of literature. However, it must be admitted that Ingemann's message was of a conservative nature. Although the period of absolute monarchy in Denmark was drawing to a close, the King and the Crown are in Ingemann's view the very essence of national life. In his opinion, all problems were solved when the people gathered as one around the king.

To judge from the number of later editions, Ingemann enjoyed a remarkable success. His historical novels were among the most popular books in the 19th century and are still being printed - although nowadays mostly in abridged versions for children.

However, it is characteristic of the Danish Golden Age that part of Ingemann's oeuvre was written for children from the very outset. During the same years when Hans Christian Andersen was publishing his first *Fairy Tales Told for Children* (*Eventyr, fortalte for Børn*, 1835 ff.), two slender volumes of hymns by Ingemann saw the light of day: a collection of *Morning Hymns for Children* (*Morgensange for Børn*, 1837), followed by *Seven Evening Songs* (*Syv Aftensange*, 1838). They were both published with a view to school prayers in the Academy, but are still among the best loved texts in Danish Christian poetry. As a final element in this aspect of literary life in Sorø, mention might be made of the fact that Ingemann's colleague Peder Hjort published one of the most popular readers for primary school: *The Friend of Danish Children* (*Den Danske Børneven*, 1839). The close connection between Hans Christian Andersen and the Sorø circle, especially B.S. Ingemann, will be further considered below.

While Ingemann was working hard in his house by the lake in Sorø (fig. 77) in order to finish his cycle of historical novels, his colleague and, in time, close friend Carsten Hauch set to work in his house in the main street of the town to create what was to be his series of historical novels. He, too, was inspired by Sir Walter Scott, but in his case this influence resulted in psychological character studies with ethical over-

tones set against a historical background. Carsten Hauch was also active as a playwright, publishing a considerable number of tragedies on subjects relating to Danish and foreign history - in the tradition introduced by Adam Oehlenschläger at the beginning of the century, which means tragedies in the Shakespearean manner.

In any discussion of the Sorø writers, it is necessary to stress the importance of the rather older poet Adam Oehlenschläger (b. 1779). Although these poets differed to a greater or lesser extent from Oehlenschläger's outlook and aesthetic views, they recognised - and sometimes adored - him as the greatest poet of their time, and they refused absolutely to accept any unkind treatment of his work by the critics. In their young days, some of them - Carsten Hauch and Peder Hjort - had supported Oehlenschläger when he was involved in literary controversy. They were his disciples. When, in 1828, Oehlenschläger was again subjected to severe criticism, the result was a polemical feud in which the Soronians played the role of one of the belligerent powers. It evolved into a war between Sorø and Copenhagen, and on this occasion the Sorø poets presented themselves as a homogeneous group.

The controversy was started by Johan Ludvig Heiberg. Since the mid-twenties he had published a number of light - his opponents would say: superficial - comedies known as "vaudevilles" and had quickly become established as the most successful playwright at the Royal Theatre in Copenhagen. At the same time he became the leading literary critic in the capital and seized the opportunity of stressing the importance of the vaudeville genre. When, in 1828, he wrote a scathing review of a new tragedy by Oehlenschläger, a counter-attack was launched against him from Sorø. It developed into a prolonged war, the ramifications of which were far too numerous to be dealt with in the present context. However, a number of main points need to be mentioned:

In the first place, it was a battle for and against Oehlenschläger's position as the foremost poet of the day, for and against his inviolability. It thus became a debate between an older and a younger school of Danish Romanticists, although the combatants were all of much the same age. It is symptomatic of the literary climate of the Golden Age that P.L. Møller, who



FIG. 77. Hans Georg Harder (1792-1873): *The home of the poet Bernhard Severin Ingemann by the lake in Sorø*, 1855. Oil on wood. 36.2 × 47 cm. Vestsjællands Kunstmuseum, Sorø. Inv. no. 282.

- as mentioned above - was the first to talk of the Sorø writers as a literary circle, was one of Oehlenschläger's supporters and an opponent of J.L. Heiberg.

Secondly, it was a controversy between the more serious poetry of the older group, dealing with subjects from Danish or Nordic history, and the more elegant work of the younger writers, which the Soronians found shallow. From their point of view, Heiberg and his supporters were literary fops.

Thirdly, it was a debate about content and form in poetry. When Oehlenschläger defended his tragedy *Væringerne i Miklagard* against Heiberg's criticism, the latter explained his aesthetic theories in detail and claimed in this connection the supremacy of form and technique in poetry. In Heiberg's own words: nothing is less important than *what* the poet says. Nothing is more important than *how* the poet says what he says. Such a claim could only be rejected

by the Soronians, to whom poetry was the expression of the eternal - or even divine - world of ideas.

Fourthly, it was - as already mentioned - a dispute between a remarkable literary group in the provinces and leading figures in Copenhagen. The war drew to an end in 1832, and it is open to discussion who was the winner. But there is no doubt that the most elegant and readable contributions came from the combatants in Copenhagen, especially from Johan Ludvig Heiberg and Henrik Hertz. In comparison with them, most of the Soronian contributions seem clumsy. These writers had no real talent for duelling of this kind, and so they could only get the worst of it. Their strength lay in the serious genres with a national, moral and religious implication. It is in a way characteristic of the atmosphere at Sorø that the first - and still the best - complete Danish translation of Homer (by Christian Wilster) saw the light of day here in 1836-1837.

So it is also characteristic of the atmosphere in this small town that it was possible to live as a poet in the neighbourhood of Sorø for years without being incorporated into the literary family. The playwright Christian Hviid Bredahl (1784-1860) lived as a poor farmer, a copyholder, a few miles north of Sorø, financially dependent on the Academy. Here, he wrote his plays, which in form were inspired by those of Shakespeare. To some extent they are reminiscent of Carsten Hauch's dramatic poetry, but thanks to their anti-Romantic implications, reflecting social, political and philosophical indignation and criticism, Bredahl was completely alien to his privileged fellow-poets at the Academy.

On the other hand, poets who did not feel at home in the literary circles of Copenhagen or who felt themselves to be outcasts from literary society, had a tendency to make contact with their colleagues at Sorø. Perhaps they might be thought of as corresponding members of the Sorø circle.

This was the case with Steen Steensen Blicher, who felt isolated in his Jutland parsonage and sought the support of B. S. Ingemann. In his letters to his Soranian friend, he often pours scorn on what in a letter of 11 October 1836 he calls "the guild of (aes-

thetic) design cutters" (Formskjærerlauget) in Copenhagen, calling Heiberg's vaudevilles the "feeblest, most insipid foppish nonsense I have ever read". ("det flaueste, fadeste Lapsesludder, jeg i mine Dage har læst", 6 February 1827).

And this was also the case with Hans Christian Andersen. As a young man, still a pupil at the grammar school in Slagelse, he would often visit Ingemann and his wife at Sorø, scarcely ten miles away. Here, he was always a dear and welcome guest, also after the death of Ingemann in 1861. Here he found comfort and support against the Copenhagen critics who – according to Andersen – neither understood him nor his poetry. Nearly 400 letters bear witness to this lifelong friendship and give some idea of this meeting between two personages who were so different in many respects: the restless Hans Christian Andersen, always about to leave Denmark in order to visit foreign countries, a man intensely fascinated by technological advances – and in contrast to him, Ingemann in his tiny, isolated provincial town, the idyllic tranquillity of which not even the building of the railway across Zealand in 1854-55 was able to disturb.

*Translated by the author  
Revised by Glyn Jones*

1. S. C. Müller, *Kortfattet Dansk Litteraturhistorie især for Borger- og Pige-Skoler*, 1853.