

Rebecca Boxler Ødegaard: **A Decade of Writers' Commemorations – and what we have learned. Part 2.** Cerl conference, Dublin, May 2016.

Thank you. As Bente already have told you I'm a research librarian and my professional background is Scandinavian, especially Norwegian literature. I will show you some examples from selected writers' commemorations of the last years and talk about some coming up soon.

(Slide 5) I will start with 2013, an important year for Norwegian literature and cultural history. It was 200 years since the lexicographer and poet Ivar Aasen, and the novelist and women rights-icon Camilla Collett were born. The Manuscripts department preserves drafts and manuscripts, diaries, letters and more unknown curiosities from both of them. Furthermore Ivar Aasen and Camilla Collett's archives are inscribed on the *Norwegian Documentary Heritage Register*, a national register of UNESCO's Memory of the World.

In 2013 it also was 100 years since women had got the right to vote in Norway. It was natural to combine this commemoration with that of Camilla Collett, who was a role model and inspiration for generations of women rights-activists. Thus, 2013 was a busy year for the National Library and the Manuscripts department.

Some words about Ivar Aasen: He was both a lexicographic pioneer and a writer of some of the most influential national poems. He was born a year before Norway achieved independence from Denmark and its own constitution in 1814. So he grew up in a political climate of growing nationalism and re-thinking Norway's self-consciousness towards Denmark. Not least on a cultural level. The official written language in Norway at this time was Danish, but many variants of different Norwegian dialects still existed all over the country. Supported financially and morally by the government, Ivar Aasen travelled through many parts of Norway, studying the dialects outside the urban districts. He became the creator of the so-called written language Nynorsk (new-Norwegian), based on Norwegian dialects. At the same time a more Norwegian-like variant of written Danish, called bokmål (book-language) was used by the majority. Since 1885 Norway has had two official written languages: *Bokmål* and *Nynorsk*. And from the start there have been bitter conflicts between those who advocate the one against the other. Today both written languages are taught in school.

Commemorating Ivar Aasen started early in 2012 by preparing his large and detailed organized archive for digitization. This was a challenging project for the Manuscripts department: (Slide 6) The archive contains hundreds of small, but important notes and

drafts, many of them written on tobacco papers. We hired a research librarian with the sole purpose to complete the electronic catalogue information and to prepare the archive for digitization. The digitization itself took about 2 years. (Slide 7) Here you can see an example: The digital picture of Aasen's original draft of his most famous poem *The Norseman*. We can download the file by ourselves and send it directly to the researcher or use it in other kind of contexts. (Slide 8) The Ivar Aasen-commemoration was completed by a seminar and a poster exhibition in November 2013.

(Slide 9) Over to Camilla Collett: She is called the first Norwegian feminist novelist, and her novel *The district governor's daughters* the first Norwegian novel that addressed social problems directly. It was published anonymously in 1854/55 and discussed women ideals and their duty to marry for rational rather than romantic reasons. Collett claimed women rights and female suffrage long before the first political feminist movements were established. (Slide 10) A large Camilla Collett-exhibition called "Getting a voice", focused not only on Collett as a writer, but also on women rights in general. Camilla Collett was the main attraction, though. Her original manuscripts, diaries and letters were essential parts of the exhibition, and (Slide 11) we produced 6 posters about both Collett and female suffrage.

Collett is known to the public for being the younger sister of the Norwegian poet Henrik Wergeland and for her unhappy love affair with another Norwegian poet, Johan Sebastian Welhaven, in her younger days. While working with Collett's manuscripts, my colleagues soon noticed that only the first half of her life was well-documented. Only her diaries and letters until 1841, when she got married to Peter Jonas Collett, were published. The year of commemoration was the perfect opportunity to explore her later years; especially her role as an activist and debater – living her life as an independent writer also after her husband's early death in 1851. (Slide 12) An international conference was arranged with an overwhelming number of participants and a book publication as a result. Inspired by enthusiastic conference speakers the Manuscripts department started the transcription and publishing of Camilla Collett's correspondences with the famous Norwegian writers Henrik Ibsen, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson and Jonas Lie. We are still working on her letters, and Collett seems now to be *hotter* than ever. In fact we are proud to say that the commemoration activities played a big part in making her popular again.

(Slide 13) But over to 2015: That year we put a lot of work into the 100-years-commemoration of the novelist and dramatist Agnar Mykle. His great erotic novel *The song*

*of the red Ruby* from 1956 was the main attraction of a large exhibition. (Slide 14). The novel was the subject of a judicial proceeding, known as the so-called *Mykle Case*. Both the writer and the publishing house ended in court over explicit sexual descriptions in the novel. In 1957 it was banished and forbidden by law, but after entering an appeal Mykle and his publisher were acquitted of the obscenity charges. Although it now was legal to sell this kind of controversial novels, the damage had been done to the writer. In the Manuscripts department there are 1000-pages-letters from Mykle's hand, showing a paranoid and sometimes megalomaniac mind. The committee for the Mykle-exhibition chose to focus not only on the writer himself but also on erotic and other kinds of controversial literature before and after the Mykle-case. (Slide 15) We produced a poster exhibition, wrote an article, and we also arranged a talk between a biographer and a research librarian from the Manuscripts department, being the expert on Mykle's archive.

From this year on the National Library decided to produce more, but smaller exhibitions for shorter periods of time. And, of course, not every writer gets an exhibition of her or his own. In many cases there "only" will be digitization and poster productions in addition to writing articles or planning one-day-exhibitions of archive material combined with seminars or evening events.

(Slide 16) This year we commemorate two important poets: Sigbjørn Obstfelder, on the left, is called Norway's first modernist writer. His most central poem "I see" indicates a change in Norwegian literature and cultural history in the 1890's. Just like Knut Hamsun's novel *Hunger* or Edvard Munch's famous *Scream* do. The poster we produced to celebrate Obstfelder, shows Edvard Munch's lithograph of him. The cold blue colour refers to the feeling of being lost and frightened in an unknown world, a main theme in Obstfelders poetry. In September there also will be opened an exhibition about Obstfelder. He died of tuberculosis only 33 years old.

The other poet to commemorate is Tor Jonsson. He tragically committed suicide, only 34 years old. Born 50 years later than Obstfelder, they have in common a dark sensibility in their poetry. Jonsson, writing Nynorsk, came from the poor and isolated districts in rural Norway and was driven by hate and despair against social unfairness and the oppression of the poor. Although he in some circles has a kind of iconic position because of his tragic death on the top of success, today he is mostly forgotten by the public. Digitization, a poster production, an evening talk and social media will hopefully lead to a renewed interest in him.

Now, what happens next? The Manuscripts department recently proposed an exhibition for 2017 in which manuscripts and letters written by famous writers in their childhood and youth will be presented. (Slide 17) Some of the writers, who we commemorate in the upcoming years, will become a part of this exhibition –like Ebba Haslund and André Bjerke. Haslund, novelist, dramatist and women activist, was a well-known debater in Norwegian cultural life until her death in 2009. She also was the head of the Norwegian writers-union in the 1970-s when politics and cultural life was in continuous conflict. The Manuscripts department has a large archive of Haslund, covering her private and professional life from the 1920s until 2009, almost a century. The planning process of how to commemorate her has just begun. In the meantime we organize and catalogue her archive, keep in contact with her children, and guide a biographer through the enormous amount of archival material. Some items will also be digitized.

The poet and novelist of mainly thriller novels, André Bjerke, is also known as an excellent translator of Shakespeare, Goethe and Moliere's plays into Norwegian. His archive in the Manuscripts department is one of the largest and most comprehensive, encompassing among other things diaries and an enormous correspondence with colleagues abroad. The archive is organized and catalogued by myself over several years, and next year there will be published a biography on Bjerke, not least a result of archival research.

Agnar Mykle, Ebba Haslund and André Bjerke were born about 100 years ago and represent a generation of writers not that distant from our decade. Because of the copyright and the sensitivity of some of the archival material, digitization will not have highest priority.

(Slide 18). To sum up: What did we learn by commemorating all these writers as we did – several of them forgotten by those not dealing with cultural heritage every day.

1. We have become better at thinking beyond our organizational borders. From being a well-functioning, but in some ways isolated section in a complex institution, we now cooperate with several other sections at the National Library on a daily basis. This kind of cooperation makes the organization of the writers' commemorations run more *smoothly*. (Slide 18-1).
2. We have improved our focus on other types of audiences like pupils, students and teachers. The National Library and its collections are meant to be for everyone but have not always been interpreted in this way. Digitization, more contact with the

press, and more events have increased the number of visitors and requests for guided tours. (Slide 18-2).

3. We have established better routines for preparing commemorations, which means we have become more professional. The commemorations are – as Bente mentioned – not coming up as unpleasant and stressful surprises but they are now a central task among other responsibilities. Still: There will always be the challenge of balancing long-term undertakings such as organizing and cataloguing the archives, and the quick, short-term work with communication and dissemination of them. (Slide 18-3).
4. We are now more visible in our profession. Even if we sometimes may wish to be more invisible again, it is exciting to see that our knowledge has become more interesting for the general public. Getting requests for talking about writers' and other's private archives in all kind of contexts, not only in professional seminars and conferences, has made us more self-confident about our own profession. (Slide 18-4).
5. And, of course: We are continuously increasing our knowledge about writers, their work and life.