

This is an electronic reprint of the original article. This reprint may differ from the original in pagination and typographic detail.

Book Review: Danmark set fra en togkupé [Denmark Seen from a Train Compartment] by Martin Zerlang

Borch, Adam

Published in:
Journal of Transport History

DOI:
[10.1177/00225266231208694](https://doi.org/10.1177/00225266231208694)

Published: 01/01/2023

Document Version
Accepted author manuscript

[Link to publication](#)

Please cite the original version:

Borch, A. (2023). Book Review: Danmark set fra en togkupé [Denmark Seen from a Train Compartment] by Martin Zerlang. *Journal of Transport History*, 45(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/00225266231208694>

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

NB. This is not the published version of the article, but the 'author accepted manuscript' (incl. changes made after the review process).

The published article can be found here:

Borch, Adam. 2023. "Book Review: Danmark set fra en togkupé [Denmark Seen from a Train Compartment] by Martin Zerlang." *Journal of Transport History* 45 (1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/00225266231208694>

The article is under copyright and the publisher should be contacted for permission to re-use or reprint the material in any form.

Martin Zerlang, *Danmark set fra en togkupé* [Denmark Seen from a Train Compartment] (Copenhagen, Gads Forlag, 2023); 304 pp., 399.95 DKK, ISBN 9788712068655.

Reviewed by: Adam Borch, Åbo Akademi University, Finland.

Denmark is a relatively small country, but the history of its railway is nonetheless a rich and diverse topic of study. Although marked by changing fortunes, expansions and declines, the railway has had a profound and widespread influence on Danish society and culture since the first train rolled out from Copenhagen on route to Roskilde in 1847. As Martin Zerlang writes at the beginning of *Danmark set fra en togkupé*, Danish “politics, economy, literature, music, mentality, have all been shaped and coloured by the railway” (12). To write a cultural history of the railway in Denmark that spans over 175 years, is, then, an important but also a difficult and somewhat daunting task. Even so, this is what Zerlang has attempted to do with *Danmark set fra en togkupé*. The attempt is successful, overall, and the work one to which readers interested in the topic will continue to return to in years to come.

Danmark set fra en togkupé speaks to current academic debates, but it is not a traditional academic publication. It seeks a broader audience. The publisher is commercial, the format large (25x28 cm) and the illustrations numerous. There are occasional references to specific scholars (e.g. Wolfgang Schivelbusch, Georg Simmel) and certain academic trends (e.g. mobility studies), but, overall, Zerlang keeps the scholarly apparatus to a minimum. Instead, he focuses on the primary material: the essays and columns; short stories and novels; poems and songs; series and films; paintings and drawings in which the railway features to a greater or lesser extent. This works well. It is an attractive and compelling book, written in an elegant and easily digestible prose, which makes it ideally suited to a

general readership. This is not to say, however, that the book is of no interest to academia – far from it – only that it is largely left up to the scholarly reader to situate the work in present discussions.

The book divides the history of the railway in Denmark into eight periods. Starting in 1840 and ending in the present, each period covers about twenty to thirty years, except the one covering the German occupation during World War II (1940-1945). A chapter is dedicated to each period, all of roughly the same length, and these are enveloped by an introduction and a conclusion. There is nothing controversial about this periodization and for a book of this sort – its audience and geographical-historical scope in mind – the chronological structure has its strengths. It gives the book a narrative progression that is easy to follow and allows Zerlang to outline the history of the railway in Denmark at the same time as he discusses how it has been perceived by artists and writers. But, it also has its disadvantages. Zerlang's readings of the primary materials bring to the fore a large variety of different themes and perspectives on the railway. The book contains passages of interest to scholars working on representations of landscape and environment; the different spaces of the railway (compartments, stations, hotels); technological developments; changing perceptions of speed and time; long-distance travel and commuting; travellers and personnel; and much more. The themes emerge naturally from issues pertaining to the period in question, the state of the railway and the work produced by artists and writers at the time. However, for readers interested in how a specific theme has been dealt with across time, it is hard to gather an overview. There are only few thematic cross-references. A topical index would have been a great help, but, unfortunately, the book only includes a list of cited names and works.

Beyond providing a much-needed study of the history of the railway in Denmark, a country which have received relatively scarce critical attention in this respect, Zerlang's contributions to current scholarship lie in his corpus of primary material and in his readings of these texts, images and films. The size of his corpus, its extent and variety, is nothing short of impressive. Although Zerlang does find time to discuss works by foreigners (e.g. Thomas Mann, Erich Kästner, Olafur Eliasson), his focus is on Danish artists and their representations and experiences of the railway both abroad and at home. There are discussions of internationally famous figures (e.g. Hans Christian Andersen, Søren Kierkegaard, Lars von Trier), but the book also brings into the spotlight lesser known writers. Naturally, not every text, image and film are the subject of close attention, but those that are benefit from Zerlang's insights. His background in literary studies is clearly discernible which means that, at times, the discussion will move in surprising directions. For example, Zerlang's analyses of the relationship between the railway and literary form are refreshingly novel in a book on transport history.

Danmark set fra en togkupé is a recommendable book and it will appeal to a broad variety of different scholars. It will be of interest to those looking for a general introduction to the history of the railway in Denmark, but, primarily, it speaks to academics working at the intersections between railway history and culture. Although the geographical scope appears narrow, there are many sections illustrating Danes' experiences and representations of travelling abroad which make the book relevant for scholars working on other regional and national contexts, in Europe but also further away (e.g. the United States, Russia).

Danmark set fra en togkupé could be useful for students and teaching purposes as it can easily be approached as a research corpus, a rich source of primary material awaiting further study.

