

British banker succeeds with publication of 'Havoc'

by Rasmus Vangshardt (translated by Duncan J. Lewis)
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The indignation was palpable, when it was revealed that Tom Kristensen's legendary novel 'Havoc' (1930) was to be published in England on the initiative of a British banker, Duncan Lewis, who has worked for Saxo Bank in Denmark and had purchased the translation rights. Who was going to ensure the quality of this publication by a soulless liberalist and happy amateur?

However, upon reading the book, it becomes clear that Lewis' British release of 'Havoc' is not the work of an amateur. In a cool, New Nordic design, he has contributed to Danish fiction, beyond crime novels, becoming available on the British market and it is hard to see how this could be a bad thing.

It was originally suggested that he had recklessly edited the text. This was clearly down to something of a misunderstanding, as it is not the case. On the contrary, the new edition leaves the translation honours to the Swede Carl Malmberg, whose solid translation was published in the USA in 1968. Lewis has merely 'adapted' it.

This adaptation consists mainly of changing the American to British spelling, however there are also genuine improvements on the 1968 original. For example, the translation of the legendary 'Angst' poem has actually been better improved upon. The most famous lines run:

'I have longed for shipwrecks
For havoc and violent death.'

This word, shipwrecks, is without doubt one of the most significant in modern Danish poetry and yet was, understandably, yet regrettably, not present in the Malmberg translation. In this new version, 'final disaster' has been replaced with 'shipwrecks' - one would have to be a communist à la Sanders or Steffensen from the novel to be against the inclusion of this obvious translation.

One of the novel's more amusing elements for a British public must, without doubt, be the figure of Vuldum, Jastrau's half Catholic colleague. Given 'Havoc' is available for the first time in the UK with this edition, it's undeniably wonderful that Vuldum, that dissolute virgin, has a hatred of two languages: Danish, because it consists only of "barbaric bits and fragments" and American, to which its "impossible" nature renders it reminiscent.

Vuldum would doubtless have applauded Duncan Lewis' input to the British version, so that he was not forced to speak that unworthy, foreign language.

Both the old translation and the new versions (there is also a review of the American version underway) grasp well the endless biblical references and Duncan Lewis has neither subtracted from nor added to these, which is wise. Overall, there are very few modifications.

"The Inevitable Kjøer" is still there and Eriksen is here, too, a class-conscious drinker on whom "life has left its mark" and who still does not "take so much as a single drink as long as the sun is still shining over Vesterbro." Neither the old nor the new translation catches the long, modernist and drink-softened jazz-vowel of the original Danish text, however the essence of the work is most certainly captured.