



## Book Review

### “Harald Moltke – Painter of the Aurora”

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*Peter Stauning: Harald Moltke – Painter of the Aurora, Denmark, www.forlagetepsilon.dk, 216 pp., ISBN-13: 978-87-993384-3-6, EUR 40.00, 2011, Published in collaboration with the Danish Meteorological Institute.*

*Harald Moltke – Painter of the Aurora*, by Peter Stauning, is a well-designed, oversize, glossy paper book focusing on the paintings of aurora done during two expeditions, one to Iceland and one to Finland, in 1899 and 1900. The first two chapters provide background on early Danish studies of the aurora, and those of the Danish Meteorological Institute which led to the two expeditions for the study of the aurora. Harald Moltke was chosen as the illustrator of these expeditions. The book is bi-lingual, with adjoining columns in Danish and English.

Peter Stauning, the author, is a retired member of the Danish Meteorological Institute. His first visit to Greenland was to the Ionosphere Station at Godhavn in 1965. Since then his work has primarily focused on geophysical observations in polar regions. He has designed several important scientific instruments, especially for the Ørsted satellite, for which he was the scientific head from 2001 until his retirement in 2009.

Harald Viggo Moltke (1871–1960) was of an eminent family with members, over the past few centuries, largely in Germany and Denmark. The beginnings could be traced, according to the family history, to the time of Charles the Great in the ninth century (Thies, 2010, p. 19). Over the centuries its members included high officials of the government, diplomats, scientists, and, of interest in the present connection, artists (Thies, 2010, p. 17). The German branch, separated from the branch that included Harald Moltke, in the seventeenth century (personal email from Heinrich von Moltke, 6 January 2012). This branch included General Field Marshall Helmuth Carl Bernard von Moltke, who loved to sketch, even as a young man. Lieutenant-General von Hegermann-Lindencrone, of the Danish army, who had been a fellow cadet in the Danish military academy, remembered that

“[e]ven in those days [about 1815] Helmuth had the talent of sketching with a firm hand characteristic pictures of such objects as interested him. How he developed this talent later on is seen by the many illustrations in ink or pencil of the descriptions which his letters contain.” (Hegermann-Lindencrone, 1893). An example of one of his sketches is reproduced in Thies (photos between pp. 192–193). Helmuth von Moltke, from a collateral branch of the family, in the early nineteenth century was trained in the Danish military academy, commissioned as a lieutenant, and then advised by a Danish mentor, accepted the offer of a commission in the Prussian army, and eventually became the chief of the German General Staff and the architect of the German victories in the wars against Denmark, Austria and France, which led to the unification of Germany under Prussia.

That part of the family that we are concerned with was of German background in Mecklenburg-Schwerin, an area adjoining Schleswig-Holstein, which for many years was a personal duchy of the king of Denmark. Many of the family found greater opportunities in the Danish government, often in the military. The Danish Moltkes were a numerous group – as Freya von Moltke, the widow of Helmuth James von Moltke, who was executed in 1945 for his anti-Nazi activities, put it to her grandson, Johannes (personal email from Johannes von Moltke, 22 November 2011): “*Moltkes gibt’s wie Sand am Meer*” – Moltke’s are like the sand by the sea. The connections between the various branches of the Moltke family are not always clear and known, even today (Thies, 2010, p. 15). But an artistic disposition does seem to be present in the family. So too does a predilection for a military career, since among Harald’s ancestors (the genealogy is given in the book under review, p. 51) were Adam Gottlob Moltke (1710–1792) who became lord chamberlain of Denmark under King Frederick V. The line leading to Harald included Christian Magnus Frederik Moltke, a general; Joachim Moltke, a colonel; and Adam Gottlob Ditlev Moltke, a Captain of Horse.

Harald Moltke was born on an estate near Elsinore, Denmark on 14 December 1871. Two years later his family emigrated to South Carolina in the United States, where Harald spent his early years. But in 1882, when he was 11, his father died suddenly of diphtheria. His mother, burdened with financial problems, returned to Denmark with her four children. Harald, who spoke no Danish at the time, had a difficult transition period. He always wanted to be a painter, and Stauning recounts the story of Harald and his elder brother going to the home of Axel Hou, director of the drawing school providing the only access to the Royal Academy of Art. They rang the bell, Axel Hou came to the door, and Harald, paralyzed, stood saying nothing. Finally Hou asked what he wanted. He replied, "*I want to become a painter.*" "*How do you know?*" asked Hou. Harald, confused, stood there – while he knew that he wanted to become a painter, he did not know how or why. Hou, obviously a man of sensitivity, noticing Harald's confusion, said, "*Well, come inside, then we can talk the question through, and then you might try.*" The interview obviously went well – Harald was admitted to the drawing school, and finally graduated from the Academy. His debut painting was exhibited in 1894.

Harald next went into the military for his required service, went on to become a second-lieutenant on active service. On 15 March 1898 he was called into his Commander's office. Full of foreboding he faced him, only to be asked: "*A relative of mine is in charge of a scientific expedition to Greenland. Would you be interested in joining him?*" Without hesitation he answered, "*Yes!*". This expedition, for the purpose of studying the geology of a portion of West Greenland, was in the summer months, when there was mostly daylight, and the aurora was not seen. When a subsequent expedition was planned for the study of the aurora Moltke was asked to join with the task of accurately reproducing the various auroral forms in paintings. This expedition, originally planned for Greenland, was to the north of Iceland, more accessible, and in a zone of frequent occurrence of auroras, in 1899–1900. Six chapters (4–9) are devoted to this expedition, with much interesting material on the human factors involved in setting up the stations, one of which was at the top of a 4000 foot high mountain, difficult of access even for the Icelandic ponies. Two of these chapters (5 and 7) are devoted to reproductions of the nineteen paintings of the aurora in the possession of the Danish Meteorological Institute during that expedition. One chapter (8) is devoted to Moltke's portraits of the personnel of the expedition team, and a final chapter (9) to the last days of the expedition.

The study of the aurora was quite successful, and led to another expedition in 1900–1901, this time to Lapland in northern Finland. Moltke was again chosen as the illustrator for the expedition. One chapter (10) is devoted to this expedition, and to reproductions of seven paintings made of auroras. These were the final paintings of aurora done by Moltke. The human side of the expedition is given in quotations from

writings of Moltke and Dan la Cour, the leader of the expedition.

Moltke's last expedition to the arctic came in 1902–1904. A small group of Inuit, isolated from the other people of Greenland, existed in the northwest part of Greenland, in an area where the United States base at Thule now stands. The existence of this group was known to earlier explorers and to whalers, but no proper anthropological study of them had ever been made. Traces of these earlier expeditions exist. Both Admiral Peary and his co-explorer Matthew Henson had sons there, born in 1906. Their descendants still live and work in Thule (Counter, 1991). I did not meet them when I visited Thule in the 1960s since they were out on the ice hunting at the time. Knud Rasmussen headed an expedition, privately financed, called the Danish Literary Expedition, to study this small group. Rasmussen had been born and raised in Greenland, and spoke the Inuit language. Moltke had met Rasmussen at a private gathering. Rasmussen told him: "*It is an artistic and literary expedition. We need to have a painter enrolled in order to depict the country and the people. I know your Greenland paintings. In the vicarage at home we have hanging a reproduction of the Nugsuark peninsula. I look at it every day.*" And Moltke joined the expedition. Thule is deep inside the magnetic polar cap, in fact near the magnetic dipole pole, and auroras are rare there. There are no paintings of the aurora by Moltke done during that period. Rasmussen (1908) subsequently published a book on his researches at Thule, with illustrations of the Inuit and their life by Moltke. I am not aware of any compilation of Moltke's illustrations of Inuit life – they would make an interesting collection.

Lithograph prints of eleven of the paintings were made originally for use in a proposed book by Adam Paulsen, the then director of the Danish Meteorological Institute (chapter 11). Paulsen, however, died before the book was written. Eventually copies of the lithographs were given as gifts to geophysical or auroral research institutions. Copies of these lithographs are included in this chapter.

A final chapter describes auroral research at the Danish Meteorological Institute after 1901; a short postscript gives the history of the paintings; and an appendix provides a short, popular, scientific description of the aurora.

Moltke's paintings of the aurora are unique. They are an accurate representation of the aurora produced at a time when photography of highly dynamic situations was not feasible. Their accuracy is attested to by a comparison of one of his paintings with a photograph of an aurora seen near Fairbanks, Alaska in the late 1960s, shown in Eather's book on the aurora (1980, p. 28–29). Until the mid-twentieth century photographs of the aurora, because of insufficient speed of emulsions, could not accurately portray the great variety of auroral forms, nor give an idea of the dynamics of the aurora. Workers in the field could only begin to recognize the difficulties of understanding the aurora from paintings such as those of Moltke. In addition, as Peter Aakjær, current director

of the Danish Meteorological Institute, puts it in his preface to the book, Moltke's paintings are useful for their artistic, cultural and historical value. This is especially so since they were made during the early part of the prolonged solar activity minimum at the beginning of the twentieth century. They also provide the general public with a view of a fascinating natural phenomenon.

I believe that any geophysics library or any researcher dealing with the aurora would be well served with a copy of the book. It can be ordered directly from the publisher through the internet address: [www.forlagetepsilon.dk](http://www.forlagetepsilon.dk).

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